READY FOR 'INDEPENDENCE'? TRANSITION BIOGRAPHIES OF FOSTER CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUTH WITHIN ENGLAND AND MELBOURNE

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ABSTRACT

Policy frames in England and Melbourne rely upon unrealistic understandings of young peoples' transition experiences. Nebulous conflation of 'youth' with 'transition' insensitively infers a desired state of adult independence is an outcome of the capacity to follow correct transition paths. These understandings are consistent with a political interest in the individualised decision making competencies of young people. This is particularly relevant to 'care leavers', whose transitions are problematised, rendering their futures 'risky', and disregarding their perspectives.

The life stories of a sample of 20 foster care-experienced young people were supported through sensory ethnographic principles. The associated methods evoked narratives of past experience within care trajectories, tracing self-representations into the present, and sense making of independent futures. Participants' transition biographies derived from a methodological and analytical orientation exploring the biographical-relational facets to transition. Metaphors of transition and independence were revealed, shaping development of a contemporary anthropological frame.

This thesis argues for a refocus upon the relational context to transition, and contests the contemporary significance of persistent debates regarding 'structure' or 'agency' as arbitrators of youths' future. Supporting a sense of relatedness is crucial when 'family' is absent, particularly when moving forward to a desired future requires high degrees of affective recalibration.

What should young people do with their lives today?

Many things, obviously.

But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.

– Kurt Vonnegut (1981)

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introducing the study

This thesis posits that there is no such thing as transition from care into a definite state of independence – only a socio-legal 'care leaving' process in situ. This initial claim expresses itself within insightful transition biographies of twenty young people, each of whom had experienced a foster care placement during their pasts. At the heart of the thesis, *Ready for 'Independence'*, lies the argument that weak preconceived notions of youth and transition shroud a sensitive understanding of the dynamic and relational nature of transitional experience. The limited scope of understanding of these concepts, as presented in policy and youth study, acts as an encumbrance to supportive practice involving care-experienced young people. In sociological and political vernacular, generally, 'youth' and 'transition' are conflated and framed as representing a time within the life course that young people move (or transition)into independent adulthood from childhood. Youth transitions are presented as 'stepping stones' towards non-dependence, with legal adulthood at 18 cast as the epicentre of the potential for adult independence.

The overarching aim of the research process was to challenge notable conceptual stasis, and bring fresh articulation to the framing of independent futures from the perspectives of care-experienced young people through their life stories. It sought to achieve a renewed conceptual clarity from the life stories of young people who had experienced foster care

during childhood. Exploring the stories of young people who had experienced various family-like trajectories across points within their childhood evoked narratives of their sense of self and relational being. The analysis of these narratives sought to de-individualise biographical accounts according to clear denotations of agency. The study therefore highlights the significance of relatedness to transitional experience, and develops a contemporary anthropological frame for understanding the interception between the relational context in which young people experience particular transition-like events and their developing identities with various expressions of independence. Drawing out young peoples' perspectives on their pasts has importance in the current climate. Understanding of the 'youth' experience is expressed through homogenised cultural relativity, with young people being judged by arbitrary markers of being an adult.

Policy into practice, however, was not disregarded as links must be considered between expressions of broader socio-cultural discourses regarding youth within related social policy. Qvortrup et al. (1994), Emond (2003) and Kelly (2003), for example, pinpoint how an 'institutionalisation' of children and young people is entrenched within policy into practice, vis-à-vis the governance culture of the institutions through which they are exposed. Therefore, the governance of relevant institutions are want to be age-structured to the extent that young peoples' perceptions on the institutional spaces into which they may be affiliated can be side-lined through the primacy of adult-centric voices. This identification initially stimulated a desire to carry out the research across two social policy contexts (chosen to be England and Melbourne). The idea to conduct the research cross-nationally

was carried through so to attune the young peoples' stories to differing emphases within policy into practice that may have shaped aspects of their transitional experience (and so have taken their life stories in different directions).

The life stories incorporated sensory ethnographic principles, which aimed to explore the meanings young people place upon transition and independence. The storytelling occurred through a process of narration from artefacts of the past and signifiers of the present and future. From this basis, the study identified and explored facets to transitional experience from the sample's perspectives and recollections of past transition-like moments. Transition, as a concept, evokes in policy a sense of forward movement toward a desired outcome, which can be prepared for and managed through youth-relevant policy. However, this thesis highlighted transition to be a complex, relationally bounded dynamic, which is underexplored in this sense within the youth sociology field. To enhance the capacity of the study to contribute to the youth and policy field in understanding experiences of transition, fieldwork was conducted across two international case sites: England and Melbourne, within the Australian state of Victoria (Section 1.3. will overview the policy terrain to highlight why these sites were considered interesting). The following section will introduce the specific aims of the study before considering the policy emphases of relevance. It ultimately highlights conceptual vagueness within policy concerning both transition and notions of independence.

1.1.1. The study's aims

The aims of this social policy-relevant study developed through an interest in key anthropological studies on the *coming of age* and youth sociology, each field seemingly lacking in a contemporary understanding of what young people draw upon in framing their future in view of past transitions. These interests were matched to a curiosity and concern about representations of young people who were viewed as having poor outcomes, despite policy and practice responses ascribing support for transition. There is an acknowledged history of the transference of ideas regarding social work best practice between England and Australia, and evidence of as many similarities in policy into practice within the Victorian care arena as there are differences (as recognised by Mendes and Moslehuddin, 2004; Cashmore and Mendes, 2008; Fernandez and Barth, 2010). A renewed governmental interest regarding the transitional outcomes of care-experienced young people in Victoria also highlighted that there was fertile ground across the two country-contexts in this area. Despite earnest intentions within the policy arena across both contexts to support transition, the debates have suggested there are limitations in practice. Primarily, relevant policy expressions were identified that highlighted contrasting steers across the contexts. This stimulated an initial research aim to 'explore the experiences of care-experienced young people within the policy contexts of England and Victoria'. However, this question led to others that considered weighty 'macro -micro' empirical links, which were deemed unsympathetic to deriving the dynamic of transition as expressed within the lived experiences of the participants.

The primary aim of the research was to gain an understanding of young peoples' own notions of independence, and how this is displayed within their present lives in view of their transitions. Other key aims developed that addressed the initial desire to invoke the meanings placed upon transition experiences, as there is limited knowledge on this within the youth field. This research introduced the concept of a 'transition biography', which developed as a methodological and analytical template to advance understanding on the concept of transition. A facet methodological approach was crafted due to unease about current epistemological emphases that seek to pinpoint transition mostly quantitatively, especially in terms of the outcomes of social pathways and experiences of socio-economic inequality. These studies (sometimes unwittingly) default to seeking to explore how social structures can redress young peoples' perceived lack of future agency to negotiate transition. As such, there are many studies defaulting to an individualistic representation of transition. The core argument of this thesis is young peoples' family displays - and how relational dynamics contextually shape transition experience- can be disregarded in dominant policy discourse to the detriment of understanding held notions of independence.

The following guiding aims developed:

- To explore expressions of sense making towards independence amongst a sample of care-experience young people, with respect to identified relational affiliations
- To explore through sensory ethnographic life story work the meaning ascribed to transition within narratives of the past

- To develop a relational-biographic understanding of transition, and consider how methodological decisions can advance a conceptual model for understanding the youth transition dynamic.

1.2. Social policy backdrop: Supporting transition; shaping independent young people

A review of the substantive literature from youth studies, the sociology of the life course, and anthropology suggest young peoples' experiences remain aligned to ambiguous markers relating to chronological age (these ideas are discussed across Chapters Two and Three). This alignment fails to consider the variance in how independence transpires according to a young person's situated context. 'Youth' are represented as cultural *liminads* - betwixt and between the statuses of child and adult. Representations of youth across these disciplines suggest the experience of being young is constructed in problematic terms, due to the pervasive notion of experiential flux and uncertain potential. The experience of youth is tied to successful and active negotiation of transition to adulthood statuses (markers of which are largely ascribed to the social pathways of employment and education). A discourse of distrust towards young people, whose potential transition patterns may be considered risky, is mirrored within policy approaches defaulting to young persons' individual and active negotiation of their transitioning. This section will pinpoint how these ideas reflect within England and Melbourne's policy impetus towards young people who are leaving, or have left, the care system.

The broader policy impetus towards transitioning youth expresses similar tensions relating to notions of an independent adult across the contexts. An increased policy surveillance involving a desired and unproblematic transition around the 'peak' transitioning ages of 16 to 21 is evident. This policy impetus is seemingly reflective of institutional concern about the future social investment of young people. Of particular concern, is the ability of young people to commit to transition patterns that indicate non-dependency and pathways away from risky behaviours linked to crime, health and potential welfare dependency (Kelly, 2003; France, 2007; DoEECD, 2010; Cuervo and Wyn, 2011, amongst others). This is contradictory as, at the time of writing the thesis, the general steers in youth policy are characterised by a reliance upon provisions through financially vulnerable community organisations amid a retraction of governmental welfare support that could enable independence (in accommodation terms, at least) (Davies, 2013).

As such, policy has a tendency to focus upon responsibilisation and economic independence, and an assumption that young people are able to have a protracted 'dependency' upon their families. Whilst it is beyond the remit of this thesis to offer a complete appraisal of youth policy across both contexts, the important message that typically relates to care-experienced young people is unreasonable parameters for 'independence' are set. These can be compounded by the wider policy impetus expecting young people to default to the family unit as a means of support.

1.2.1. Transitional independence; expressions in 'care leaving' policy

In England's 'leaving care' policy context, the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000) amended the leaving care provisions outlined within the Children Act (1989) and reaffirmed a vision to support the 'transition into adulthood'. The subsequent *Care Matters* White Paper (DfES, 2007) consolidated key themes raised within these Acts, but also extended proposals made in reaffirming a requirement to widen the reach of support for care leavers. The White Paper underlined a persistent policy theme in this area that local authorities across England have a legislative duty to support young people leaving care placements and moving towards independent living. *Care Matters* reaffirmed that young adult care leavers should expect the same degree of care and support that mainstream young people would reasonably expect from a parent. Local authority post-care teams are expected, through relevant legislative authority, to support a 'transition' from care by enabling the young person to feel ready for independent living. A personal advisor or social worker (depending upon whether a young person has not ceased to be looked after) is granted to help shape a pathway plan. This plan should be amended and re-referred to whilst the young person receives support from post-care services. It incorporates assessment of the young person's transitioning needs and future considerations regarding accommodation, education and employment.

Care leaving policy in England is broadly based upon financial principles to help stabilise the journey into independent living, as 16-18 year olds are generally excluded from the receipt of social security benefits. Moreover, support has grown regarding education pathways through personal advisors, one-off bursaries, and a commitment from Universities that

students who have left care should be acknowledged primarily as part of the admissions process. This momentum has meant that the age through which local authority support is granted has been extended for some up until the age of 25 (however, typically, if further or higher education begins before 21). Local authorities are funding and providing supported lodgings arrangements for 16-18 year olds who could not remain in their foster placements. These arrangements aim to smooth the transition to independent living and mimic the foster care family principle. Pilots have also occurred nationwide to allow young people to remain in foster care up until 21; there is no evidence that this will be nationally implemented (at the time of writing).

In Melbourne, similar emphases are apparent within policy centering upon the age of 16-18 as the juncture in which independence should be harnessed. However, policy and practice is not enshrined through central government (federal) legislation, as is the case in England. Each Australian state has its own legislation, policy and practices in relation to the care system, and as such, there is no legal directive for uniformity in care leaving procedures and legislative duties may be differently expressed. A similar ideal of 'corporate parenting' is not apparent in the Australian context and so transition-planning protocol varies (Mendes et al., 2011a). In Victoria, there is a similar principle to pathway planning, and this procedure should be in place at least a year before leaving care occurs. For the first time, the state legislated for leaving care and after-care services for young people up to the age of 21 through the Children, Youth and Families Act (2005). This support centres upon financial 'brokerage' inclusive of one-off grant payments for independent living and any education,

training and employment resources required. Community organisations that advocate and provide services in Victoria have galvanised efforts around highlighting the need to extend state departmental commitment towards strengthening provision. A significant number of non-statutory community organisations, that are known providers or advocates for children and young people in care, provide after-care support packages, which are largely independent of governmental funding and directorates. These organisations also provide supportive 'lead tenant' semi-independent accommodation for 16-18 year olds preparing to leave care. This mix of sector provision has stimulated the state department's introduction of a helpline to inform young people on access to local services.

In England, the Children (Leaving) Care Act provisions have undergone revision within the statutory guidance *Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers* (DfE, 2011). This guidance reaffirms a requirement for local authority post-care support to be flexible to the needs of young people, the majority of whom are unable to delay their transition to independent living until they are emotionally and financially able. Likewise, the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry in 2011 also underscored that the transition process towards 'independence' should be a more gradual and flexible one, and that legislative principles should be enshrined. Each policy-related document suggests young people experience major issues in the 'transition to independent living'. This is despite acknowledgement that there is limited evidence shedding light on the long-term negative outcomes of insufficient support and relatively poor outcomes. This paucity of understanding is compounded by a focus upon transition to independent living, without a

reliable understanding of the transition dynamic and how sufficiently long-term support can be enabled through this. The policies accredit weak notions of independence linked to a transition to adulthood - the lived experience of transition is consequently lost. Youth transition has defaulted to an alignment with the brokering of independence in young adulthood, arguably linked with a prevailing socio-political concern for non-dependent identities.

1.3. Thesis structure

The thesis is presented as follows:

Chapter Two, *Youth and Transition, a Nebulous Marriage* provides a critical appraisal of the concepts at the heart of the study. The chapter will highlight how the representation of youth as a liminal 'in-between' period in the life course (through which young people transition towards adult independence) detracts from a nuanced understanding of transitional experience. It will map the key theories that have guided youth transition studies and highlight the epistemological limitations to the concepts. This will lead on to Chapter Three, *Transition and the Young Person's Biography,* which introduces the thesis' developed empirical concept of a 'transition biography'. The chapter will discuss how the biographies of young people became of interest in youth-related study, and how the metaphor for understanding youth transition has progressed accordingly. It will argue that a holistic understanding of young peoples' transitioning would ground their experiences in respect to their relational being, rather than focus upon individualised biographical accounts.

Chapters Two and Three provide the substantive arguments for the development of the transition biography concept, whilst Chapter Four introduces the facet methodological approach incorporated to explore relational-biographic dynamics within the life story accounts of 20 participants. The chapter will detail the methodological facets guiding the research relationship and construction of the life stories, the sensory ethnographic data collection methods that encouraged meaningful storytelling, and the narrative dialogue connecting past transitional experience into the future. Chapter Five will proceed to highlight the analytical facets guiding the narrative analysis that developed specifically for the study. The care trajectory facet highlighted the participants' family displays and identification with past transition experience, biographical synopses of the stories will draw these out and introduce the participants. Chapters Six to Eight will present the study's findings highlighting the analysis conducted from narrative units within the life story texts. The care trajectories provide the initial structure to the findings; the meaning ascribed to transition experience and sense making of independence will be discussed in view of the care trajectories and root metaphors derived from the texts. For presentational ease, the induced metaphors for understanding the plurality of experiences are separated according to three chapters clustered according to care trajectory types.

Chapter Nine offers a discussion of the findings, and introduces a contemporary anthropological frame for understanding transition and independence that developed from the empirical findings of study, namely a 'transition jigsaw'. Chapter Ten concludes by making explicit connections between the guiding aims of the study (presented in Section 1.2)

and the developed ‘thesis’. The heart of the thesis is that youth research, policy and practice needs to adopt a revised metaphor for understanding young peoples’ transitional experiences. An understanding that refocuses upon the relational qualities of transition experience, rather than to default to pathway planning competencies as expressed in politically ascribed outcomes for young people.

CHAPTER TWO - YOUTH AND TRANSITION, A NEBULOUS MARRIAGE

2.1. Chapter introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the dominant concepts steering this study, these being youth and transition. The thesis argues that the unhelpful conflation of 'youth' with 'transition' hinders a critical, empirical evaluation of each concept. The chapter will argue that conceptualisation of both youth and transition entrench problematic perspectives onto the transitional experience associated with young people. Firstly, the chapter will chart the discourses surrounding youth, which is socially constructed as a troubled life course phase (a representation that will be highlighted as having a long history). The chapter will then explore how these representations foreground conceptual limitations, which are overt in the policy and youth fields. These fields are predicated upon an 'artefact of expertise' (Kelly, 1999: 2000), said to unjustly impose definitional terminology onto what is a relativist concept consistent with the plurality of youth experience.

The remainder of the chapter will highlight the promise life course sociology may offer in understanding the youth phase. It also considers how life course perspectives can unhelpfully enhance the abstraction of 'youth' as a period of temporal flux, rather than in its experiential diversity. The chapter will continue to grapple with the conceptual vagueness of youth transitions by discussing how 'transition' currently binds the experience of young people to social pathways, and therefore the idealised socio-political function of transition.

The chapter will close by positioning the study in the youth field amid persistent epistemological tensions regarding what is known about how young people experience contemporary society.

2.2. 'Youth': Betwixt and between

Any reference to 'youth transitions' naturally situates young people in a given society upon a life course spectrum. In sociological and political vernacular, generally, youth and transition are conflated and framed as being representative of a period within the life course that younger generations move (or transition) into from childhood. Youth transition is represented as an 'unstable period of life between childhood and adulthood' (Spence, 2005: 47). Across this life phase, prescribed markers of childhood, youth, and adulthood in a given society are historically and culturally contingent (Jenks, 1996; Blatterer, 2007). As James and Prout (1997: 227) elucidate, each 'time of life' within the life course will 'confer particular qualities and attributes'. Despite common biological changes, the perception of ageing within cultures is that the process has its own temporal parameters and markers - the outcome being a 'social construction of the ageing process' (James and Prout, 1997: 227). As a sociological concept, youth in modern times reflects a categorisation within the life course that is socially constructed (see for example, Mizen, 2004; Mitterauer, 1992; Jones, 2009). Youth persistently represents a 'struggle between the young and the old' (Bourdieu, 1993: 95), rather than a biologically and developmentally determinable threshold concept as adolescence is conceived of in sociological terms (James, 2004).

Conceptual framing regarding what constitutes youth thus evolves, evidenced by shifting definitions of this period between childhood and adulthood, and the temporal space attributed to it. These definitional shifts and nuances highlight continuity with Jenks's (1996) assertion that (with reference to the historically and culturally-specific social understandings of 'childhood') conceptualisations can become stunted through an ontological focus on age-status positioning in relation to 'adult' members of a society. Similarly, this section will highlight how a focus on the positioning of youth in relation to advancement from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood, spurs conceptual stasis. Youth is essentially perceived as a process of becoming, and not experiencing. Turner (1987) describes a similar perception of youth as being 'betwixt and between' during key threshold transition times. Conceptual stasis leaves understandings of youth, and its ontological footing as a period in the life course, ambiguous and potentially open to dominant discourses of power (Bourdieu, 1993). As Jenks (1996: 10) highlights, this stasis means conceptualisations of the child (and, by extension, youth) as an age-stratified period in the life course would find 'voice only as a distant echo of what is yet to become'. These conceptions leave in its midst essentialist and fixed understandings of experience and being 'youth'.

2.2.1. The historical conception of 'youth'

It has been highlighted that the definition of 'youth' is socially constructed. A common theme in the literature is that youth is a period in the life course, experience of which entails temporal movement from one age-related phase to another (James and Prout, 1997). Whilst

the markers of this temporal phasing have evolved historically, a defined period of youth has always essentially been observed as representing a 'struggle for independence' (James, 2004: 23), within whichever timeframe the concept is applied. A study of youth transitioning also considers how young people move through this period in life in relation to peers, other age-defined generations, and the state. Thusly further shaping youth as a socially constructed period in the life course. This relativity demarcates youth as a socioeconomic category, due to measures of how far socially constructed markers of adult independence are met, and whether statuses as dependent or nondependent are ascribed. Even in the middle ages, the period in which 'the child becomes youth' was precipitated by movement from the 'natal home' to another as representative of a 'rite of passage' into becoming an independent adult (Goldberg et al., 2004: 9). Goldberg et al. (2004: 10) recognised in historical literature that the youth period was characterised as 'moving from a certain to uncertain world'. Historical conceptions give primacy to the notion that youth, by nature, is a temporal flux between social statuses.

It has been emphasised that the condition of 'youth' encapsulates temporal movement between the pre-defined social statuses of childhood and adulthood; the location and expression of the 'youth' period is, consequently, divergent. In fact, the period of youth as an identifiable categorisation after childhood and adolescent puberty was preconceived as existing from after the ages of adolescence (categorised as age 14 to mid-to-late twenties) right-up until the ages of 45 or 50 (Ariès, 1962). In *Centuries of Childhood,* Ariès primarily explored early (circa 17th Century) social categorisations of children, positioned in this period

of the life course in respect to their statuses relative to adult caregivers. Herein youth was conceived of as occupying 'the central positions among the ages' and as being representative, in Aristotelian terms, of an age 'called youth because of the strength in the person to help himself and others' (Ariès, 1962: 21).This is unlike the child and adolescent who were typically cast as being reliant on others and free from responsibility. Within this epoch, childhood became conflated with dependency, so that transition into adulthood was marked by becoming independent of childlike reliance. Ariès description of the adolescence phase, however, has salience with current conceptualisations of the youth phase. This somewhat highlights the murky conceptual space between childhood and adulthood, but is also reflective of how the temporal space between childhood and adulthood became set apart (Jones, 2009).

A distinct period of youth within the life course came into further prominence in the 18th and 19th Century in early modernity, a time of 'enlightenment when the belief in the political and 'rational' subject dominated' (France, 2009: 17). This new focus on a 'rational subject' influenced a shift from conceptions of youth in view of their social and relative position amongst the ages towards the internal 'storm and stress' modes of thought (Springhall, 1986). This shift led to a cultural rebranding of adolescence as 'teenagers' at whim to their inner irrationality and youthful inexperience (Hall, 1904 in Jones, 2009). A view that young people transitioning to adulthood (and, therefore, becoming a rational adult) were a potential social problem reached ascendency. The social consequences of widening industrialisation, and the resulting identification of youthful working classes, entrenched

wider social concern and understandings of youth as a social category causing potential social malice (MacDonald, 1997; Schindler, 1997). Youth remained a non-neutral concept in a dissimilar sense to child or adult, as these had grounding in terms of biological age categorisations. Thus, the youth experience lacks clear conceptual anchors as it is often defined by what it does not represent, rather than what it does (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), opening up potential for essentialist claims of the experience of youth as a *non-status.*

2.2.2. The influence of anthropological understandings of a youth period

Anthropological studies of the post-childhood phase also brought into view the identification of the 'youth' condition as a socially constructed temporal period. Culturally specific anthropological perspectives highlighted how life course phases are experienced within particular non-industrialised societies. The work of Margaret Mead (1943) influenced sociological understandings of youth around the time of writing (Jones, 2009). The youth condition was represented as a phase of becoming, or *Coming of Age*, a process wherein various culturally specific *rites of passage* occur marking a transition towards an adult social status. In *The Rites of Passage* (1960), Arnold van Gennep denotes youth to be a representation of a period of 'social puberty'. Youth represented a social position marked by particular culturally defined rituals or ceremonies (*rites of passages)* before the transition to adult life and marriage, parenthood, and forms of social mobility consummating adulthood. The phase of youth was characteristic of *liminality* – a symbolic and experiential process of an individual's coming of age, whereby young people would transition between a previous and new social status. However, the young *liminads* (with liminality representing transition

rites) still commanded a social status as youth experiencing rites of passages that defined their place in society.

These seminal anthropological studies also emphasised young *liminads* as positioned in a temporal phase of limbo between statuses, with the outcome of destination posited as adult independence as an ascribed societal status. This anthropological framing of transitional experience opens up the possibility to explore unique facets to the period of youth as constituting a more well-defined life course phase, one set apart between the two social statuses of childhood and adulthood. The life story data derived for this study of transitions offers findings that shape a contemporary frame for understanding these transitional dynamics, which demystifies liminal periods as representing transcendence towards discursively cast age statuses.

The work of Mead and van Gennep emphasised the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood statuses as representing a linear and relatively smooth process of becoming socially integrated as an adult into a given society. This linearity was consistent with culturally sanctioned and specific *rites of passages,* which contrasted in its emphasis to the adolescent deficit models accentuating the 'storm and stress' phase of youth. Rites of passage theses can represent culturally hegemonic understandings of the phenomenon in traditional, non-Westernised societies. This is suggestive of an 'unproblematic fit between generations, and 'smooth transition to adulthood which were unlikely to be interrupted or remain incomplete' (Jones, 2009: 9). What remains consistent, however, is the evolution of a

temporal space associated with a phase of youth in the life course and that, in Bourdieu's (1984) words, 'the frontier between youth and age is something that is fought over in all societies' (in *Sociology in Question,* 1993: 94). Writing in 1965, Jahoda and Warren (in Jones, 2009) suggest that social categorisations of a youth life course period has become susceptible to problematic youth discourses due to an unclear and protracted temporal space in which young people are discursively placed.

2.2.3. The challenge of psychological and sociological advances to anthropology

Conceptual understandings of the period of youth as being precariously situated between childhood and adulthood, and being of macro-level and societal concern, were further embedded by the early work of Stanley Hall. *Adolescence* (1904) is notable in historical accounts as conceptually foregrounding youth as emblematic of a potential social problem, this emphasised the requisite of education to civilise the transition to adulthood (Passerini, 1997; Muncie, 2004). In *Adolescence,* psychologist Hall conceived of the adolescent phase as reflecting a troublesome period between the primitivism of childhood and civilised adulthood (a troubled phase due to the dynamic shifts and tensions between these polar opposites). Modern conceptualisations of youth would support Muncie's (2004: 69) observation that Hall's 'characterisation of adolescence as a period of disturbance akin to sickness has been successfully popularised', to the extent that the troublesome facets associated with the period are 'accepted as common-sense'. These ideas were further embraced due to political and cultural changes in the 20th Century, which stimulated the representation of troubled youth. The conceptual lens was narrowed in terms of a *youthful*

promise versus *problematic youth* dichotomy – or, youth at risk or risky, youth requiring protection or regulation (Muncie, 2004). The dichotomising of the condition and experience of youth in this manner unearthed a political and social policy tension, reflective of responses to the 'youth problem' as twin rationales encouraging young peoples' potential for independence, but also ensuring they make a positive contribution to society. A tension that remains contemporarily salient.

Advances in sociological understanding of the interception between society and individuals' life course have endorsed the idea that individuals (and particularly socially 'vulnerable' transitioning young people) are navigating their lives within a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). The risk society thesis has implicated upon understandings of the transition towards independence in industrialised and globalised nations. The *rites of passages* experienced by those in traditional societies suggest a linear path that occurs across a shorter time span. This counters late modern (post-1980) conceptualisations of the youth period as representing a new life stage that is distinctly explorative. Late modern youth are understood to be able to delay their rites of passages towards adulthood, meaning the time between childhood and adulthood is increasingly protracted (as per Arnett's emergent adult or deferred adulthood theses, 2000; 2004). These fresh conceptual lenses regarding the youth condition still fundamentally evoke associations of dependency as representing non-adult status. This association has proliferated due to shifts in the broader political economy that weakens the ability of young people to seek independence, change that has shifted attention to dependency in 'adulthood'. These changes present particularly in relation to a

recognised destandardisation of household formation amongst young people in their twenties and early thirties and, consequently, an observed increase in reliance on family resources (Heath and Cleaver, 2003; ONS, 2012). Notions of a youth in the life course, therefore, bring into view the concept's socially contingent and fluid nature, the structural bounding of the concept in terms of socioeconomic independency, and the idea that the youth period is characterised by risky flux and uncertainty.

2.2.4. 'Youth' potentials and social change

Conceptual understandings of the 'youth' condition proliferated into young people being aligned with 'social change'. These expressions are particularly located in socio-political movements circa 1920s to 1960s, particularly in Fascist 'revolutionary' Italy and student movements in America. During this era, youth were becoming synonymous with embracing and revolting for political change, and thus were levelled with being a threat to social order (Passerini, 1997). Progressively, therefore, youth became conceived of as a problematic temporal space in the life course detached from cultural, biological and developmental aspects of childhood and adolescence, into a condition indicative of uncertain potential. These conceptual developments turn attention towards a structural influence upon categorisations of youth. A contemporary example of this is how youth are embroiled in influential moral underclass discourses, turning attention to whether their behaviours are to blame for their social exclusion, rather than systematic inequality (Levitas, 2005). This discourse accentuates young peoples' potential to be socialised into deviance and welfare dependency, resulting in punitive policy responses (as reflected in the work of MacDonald,

1997 and France, 2007), and have contributed to entrenched institutional mistrust of 'youth' (Kelly, 2003). These evolving conceptual frameworks also discounted the historical 'romantic' ideals of youth that resulted from alignment with age-bounded romanticism regarding childhood and, as such, childlike innocents in need of protection (James, 2004; Passerini, 1997). This romantic notion proliferated before modern conceptualisations of a youth that have embraced young peoples' positioning with social problems.

Youth was once synonymous with a romantic notion of being 'a seed of new wealth for the future, capable of annihilating the misery of the past as the promise of individual or collective regeneration' (Passerini, 1997: 281). Conversely, a problematic youth conceptual lever is somewhat compounded by historical notions of youthful promise and potential. This aspect of individuation links to Locke's *tabula rasa,* a theory of the mind presupposing childhood and youthfulness is representative of an experience-less clean-slate that is shaped through socialisation. *Tabula rasa* opens up the binary proposition, and societal concern, that the young can be over or under-socialised either to their advantage or to their peril (Jenks, 1996; O'Neill, 1994). In understanding the position of young people in society, institutional conceptions of youth elevate the perilous aspect of transitioning, and convey a lack of faith in young people to transition successfully through their schemas. The troubled youth transitions perspective also lay forth 'claims to know better what constitutes desirable futures' (Kelly, 2003: 172). Therefore, the process of becoming for youth is imbued with both potential and risk, and conceptual understandings reinforce the notion that young people can be shaped positively or negatively vis-à-vis their experience of transition.

This idea of a structurally endorsed preferred future is, of course, subject to derailment and problematic outcomes. Undesired outcomes ideologically contrast with notions of a fully-fledged future citizen that represents a 'sound investment' in a current social investment state orthodoxy (Dowbrowolsky, 2002: 44). Youthful promise blends into the ideals of a social investment state, with the future destination being the transition into a successful adulthood. However, the current primacy of social investment policies (traceable within both the UK and Australian context; see for instance, Perkins et al., 2004; Smyth, 2007) has not only redefined the relationship between family, young person and the state (Lister, 2003), but also reinforces definitions of youth as being potential investments or potential risks. The interception of *at risk* discourses renders the experience of youth to be a correlative process between the temporal configuration of the childlike/youthful self and the desired/undesirable future self. These institutionally endorsed processes are prescriptive and 'fundamentally normative' (Kelly, 2003: 172). In all, the potentiality of youthful promise posing as risky behaviour splinters categories of youth according to their perceived vulnerability to risk; this has special salience with representations of care-experienced young people whose experiences are explored in this study.

2.3. 'Youth' as an artefact of expertise

This section highlights the efficacy of Kelly's (2000; 2003) argument that current conceptual levers delimit the representation of young people, and therein an acknowledged diversity of forms of 'youth' and transitional experiences. The posited outcome of these conceptions is the youth condition has become an 'artefact of expertise' (as per Kelly's theses), whether

within overly regulative governance structures or from those exploring young peoples' societal mooring through youth studies. The preceding section has highlighted the conceptual slipperiness upon which the youth period within the life course is represented. An historical appraisal of the concept as a social construct reinforces the notion that youth have long occupied the *wild zones* in modernity's imaginings (Kelly, 1999). The primacy of this conceptual limitation is coupled by the conceptualisation of youth experience as a process of becoming, bringing young peoples' transition to the fore in terms of concern and regulation:

> *…Youth is an artefact of a history of diverse ways of thinking about the behaviours and dispositions of those who are neither Child nor Adult. As an artefact of expertise, Youth is principally about 'becoming'. Becoming an adult, a citizen, autonomous, mature, responsible, self-governing. There is some sense in which **all** constructions of Youth defer to this narrative of becoming, of transition. There is also a sense in which becoming automatically invokes the future (Kelly, 2003: 171).*

The concept's signification as a temporal flux centred upon youthful inexperience means it can be open to problematisation, with the troubled aspects of transitioning towards independence representing the main gauge through which to envisage the youth experience. Essentially Gidden's (1991) conception of a *colonisation of the future* via proponents of discourses of risk and uncertainty rings true for the exploration of youth. Institutional governance concerns are transposed onto the youth experience, stimulating state monitoring on the private spaces in which transitions occur (Mizen, 2004; Muncie, 2004). These discourses certainly open up the debate on how far representations of youth in

social policy are an ‘obvious manipulation’, how markers of adulthood as expressed by the older, and powerful, generations are ‘an enormous abuse of language’ in applying ‘the same concept to subsume under the same terms social universes that have practically nothing in common’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 95). Current representations, and a refocus on troubled transitions, are forged in relation to young people who have seamlessly and successfully transitioned into adult independence, and display the requisite markers of adult (and active) citizenship. However, these normative and homogenised modes of thinking about youth are being challenged through fresh epistemological bases seeking to understand the youth experience.

As France (2009: 23) has observed, a post-structualist cultural turn in the social sciences has impacted upon the youth study field and ‘brought new ideas and theories that have highlighted the agency of the young, their creativity, and their innovation’. This study, particularly, accepts a connective ontological base to the position of youth, thus it seeks to derive the dynamic nature of youth experience through the inter-connective relational contexts in which transition is performed and sense making is framed. Current sociological foci have simultaneously stalled in its framing of the youth experience (in terms of the structure and agency dichotomy, as will be further explored in Section 2.6), but also open-up potential to explore the divergence of experiences and associated youth cultures. The omnipresence of sociological debates regarding the place of structure and agency across the life course sanctions explorations of the youth period in terms of mainstream sociological theory. This theoretical imposition aligns with the importance of individual planning and

negotiation of the biography, all amid rapid social change and a proliferation of choice and opportunities (Beck and Beck-Gernshein, 2002). However, these debates include space to explore how young people may reflexively orientate themselves and experience their transitions inclusive of aspects of biographical diversity (for example, Henderson et al., 2007).

As has been stated, youth is a contested and relative term used to describe the life course period from childhood to adulthood, with the process of becoming an adult independent a constant factor in conceptualisations. Of interest to this debate, Ariès (1962: 19) emphasised that the 'ages of life' in ancient times represented scientific categorisations that 'entered into mental habits' and formed part of a physical description of a person matching the position in the category of ages. This section has suggested that age ascriptions have become actual discourse-laden categorisations that reflect a position in the life course within abstract (and protracted) temporal spaces. Notions of generativity (Erikson, 1950), involving adult members of society guiding youth within a contemporary 'risk society', would be an ideal. However, conceptualisations of a protracted temporal space in which youth are located has raised questions about whether there is an increased polarisation between the generations. This polarisation may mirror a class-based struggle evolving from generational unease and the 'democratisation of consumption' that has created a market for youth and youth culture (Passerini, 1997: 316). Indeed, particularly confronting to generational and civic relations remain cultural expressions of social inclusivity amongst young people pinned

to purchasing power of products symbolising youth culture. A youth market highlighting a 'living in the now, pleasure seeking, product-hungry' ethos (Savage, 2008: 465).

The central argument concerning conceptual stasis founded upon generational misrepresentations of youth, is that a failure to understand young people forgoes an intuitive understanding of their situated being and experiences. This misrepresentation of experiences runs the risk of weakening the ability for social policy to support transitions, should support be an entitlement, required, or sought. In terms of Bourdieu's (1993: 95) concept of social fields, in order to comprehend generational disharmony 'you have to know the specific laws of functioning of the field, the specific prizes that are fought for and the divisions that emerge in the struggle'. It is in exploring the aforementioned conceptual and representational disambiguates that the thesis is located.

2.4. Researching youth transitioning: The influence of a life course perspective

The previous section has explored the conceptualisation of 'youth' and its placing as a liminal period in the life course. This section focuses upon another key concept in this research, transition. The shortfalls raised in conceptualising youth are somewhat reflected in current theoretical understanding of how youth transitions may be experienced. As aforementioned, the conceptual efficacy of youth remains contested, and the temporal space in which the youth period is experienced is set apart and less defined. What remains, however, is youth are discursively positioned within a transitional period towards becoming an adult. Youth are

judged relative to notions of what childhood and adulthood represents. In as much as, transitional states towards adulthood infer detachment from behaviour or attitudes considered child-like. By this token, youth is indicative of marginality as it is construed to be a transitional state preoccupied with preparation towards adult status. In a general sense, transitioning youth are differentiated amongst other groups because of these prominent structuring categories of their place in the life course. Life course sociology has prominence in foregrounding this conceptualisation and subsequent explorations of transition (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Green, 2010). This prominence is due to how life course theory can trace cohorts of youths' transitional outcomes associated with cultural ascriptions of adulthood, thus the perspective builds theory around the changing nature of youth transitions through time.

It remains the case that a 'life course' is a concept that 'provides a means of structuring and apprehending lives' (Gubrium et al., 1994: 24). To an extent, therefore, life course theory is a useful research-related lens for understanding transitional experience. However, caution needs to be exercised as life course understandings, by virtue, may shroud individual meaning making in favour of overviews of identified structural influences upon transition resulting from historical and political change. A macro-level emphasis in relation to individual transitional experience is problematic to the derivation of experiential understanding. At a base level, an individual's perception of an event occurring, and a related process of personal adaptation, consolidates any transitional event (Adams et al., 1976). Gubrium et al. (1994) do posit that key life course experiences are *encountered*

independently from individual interpretation, due to the structural shaping of the life course through state institutions. Life course sociology can, therefore, direct us to interpreting individuals' life changes in terms of common sense, pre-conceived notions of what transitions related to, for example, becoming independent of kin or moving up the career ladder represents. In other words, the socio-structural aspects of the life course are 'established, permanently attached, and accepted' (Gubrium et al., 1994: 25).

Conceptualisations of transition within life course perspectives are certainly focused upon the macro, structural influences upon experience. According to Kohli (2009), this focus results from the life course being viewed as a dimension of social structure. The implication to the conceptualisation of transition being the acknowledgement of systematic rules ordering transitional patterns is elevated. These organising principles stimulate what is deemed a sequential logic to transitions (for example, career progression and personal development), transitions of future orientation (or anticipation of life projects), and time perspectives of past or future transitions (anticipation of what is ahead, recollection of life transitions). Any normative illusions of what transitioning towards adulthood entails infers that meaningful progress in the life course is consolidated through meeting social standards, observable as markers associated with adulthood. This is despite life course markers being difficult to evidence; particularly as individual meaning is enveloped by a plurality of experience and timed phasing across the life course.

Transitions identified within a life course can be observable as an experiential process that exists within a social sphere consisting of orientating rules. However, these rules are followed as an individualised endeavour in response to social patterns, and experienced as transition(s). If it were the case that transition is reflective of holistic encounters during the life course, one would assume that life course theory would theoretically give less prominence to social sequencing and rules. George (2003) has observed that life course research that discusses the individual broadly defaults to a focus upon the ability of human agency to adapt and influence a life course. However, there is limited empirical detail on the social action of individuals both shaping socio-political conceptions of transition and markers of independence within life course sociology. Shanahan (2000: 668) has emphasised, however, that youth transitions towards adulthood are not conceived of as a 'discrete set of experiences that are temporally bounded in the life course' within contemporary theorising and empirical research. Instead, transitions are viewed as being bounded within a biography and accumulatively shape later life.

2.4.1. The significance of 'linked lives'

The meaning attributed to transitional experiences across the life course, Gubrium et al. (1994) argue, derives from individuals' projection of a *collective image* of key social expectations ascribed to temporal life course structural components. The characteristics, and experiential consequences of these life course categories, become of interest with respect to the concept of transition as experiencing transitions is understood to be representative of complex dynamic movement. A dynamic often accumulating in the

assumption of socially consummated statuses and identities. Micro-level relational aspects of life course transitions can remain in view concerning institutional life course framing, especially via Elder's notion of *linked lives* (Giele and Elder, 1998). Linked lives explores the opportunities and constraints that social relationships pose to the direction of the life course, and how these relationships are negotiable in the purview of individual agency. Notions of linked lives helps trace the interdependent nature of family kinship over time (Putney and Bengtson, 2003). The concept of linked lives resonates with explorations of transitions towards adulthood from care settings, as relations with families (in initial analyses, at least) are inseparable from the system of care with its legislative initiation of family life.

It remains the case that links between the social context and personal biography are infused within life course research (George, 2003), reflecting a conceptual aspect which is difficult to separate when researching transition (in particular, within specific cross-national social policy legislative frames). This position concurs with Elder et al's 2003 thesis that transition is a by-product of institutionalised patterns and related social expectations, and embedded in social history. Of pertinence to this study is the care trajectory within which the sample transitioned between family homes during their pasts. Of course, a trajectory of care is abetted by a child protection system that is representative of a social institution. This 'institution' initiates sequences of transitions and an artificial order to family relations due to legislative processes. An institution within the relational sphere thus directly shapes care-experienced young peoples' biographical orientations, though these have consequence to

other transitional experiences. The structural context denotes age to be a universal categorisation and precursor to changing roles ascribed to young people. The statuses afforded ages develop, with a primary outcome being they give order and predictability to the life course (Cain, 2009). Inherent to care-experienced youths' biographies are what could also be termed age appropriate statuses. The institutional discourses of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood provide the legislative frames through which being in a family represents, and what being prepared to exit care entails.

The conceptual complexity relating to 'youth' and 'transition' dovetail, thus they require essential unpacking, as both appraised together are problematic from the outset. A particular critique of fusing life course perspectives with explorations of youths' transitional experience is that the principles are wedded to traceable patterns amongst youth cohorts, and therefore the ever-present interception of institutional sequencing of transition through policy. However, a distinction forms between exploring sequenced patterns of life change across the life course (or outcomes at particular age-related phases) and transitional negotiation consistent with the young person's biography. This distinction delineates large-scale cohort studies of 'youth' generations (which the thesis will argue propagate the illusion of a dominant, orientating transition biography) away from ones that consider the more experiential aspect of so-called transitional liminality.

Whilst individuals experience many transitions across different realms within a life course, some transitions have cultural and social significance accompanied by ceremonial gatherings

of extended networks. Other transitions hold less ritualistic symbolism, but remain perceived as important turning points in a young person's life course (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). However, whatever the nature of the transition, significant transitions occur upon an experiential sphere involving dynamic movement towards the transition and following. This sphere of experience is observed in social anthropology as the liminal period (the importance of liminality in this study will be further discussed in Chapter Three). In spite of this, the next section will highlight how life course sociology has encouraged an anomaly in transition research in its focus upon movement between life course stages, whereby transition is conceived of as solely or always reflective of a process of becoming.

2.4.2. Life course discontinuity and becoming something else

In an attempt theoretically to model the impact of transitional flux, to aid understanding of how individuals may adapt to life events, Adams et al. (1976: 5) define a transition as 'a discontinuity in a person's life space'. Conceptualisations of youth as the opening-up of temporal space in the life course would emphasise that the transition to adulthood could be representative of a discontinuity, underlining that this definition is a decent starting point in conceiving of transition(s). The cultural and social embedded quality of transition is further emphasised in definitions highlighting transition as mirroring changes in status and role ascription within a given society. George (1993) highlighted how role theory acted as a precursor in the study of life transitions, with exit from a former role into a new role (or status) being representative of a transition. Whilst status and role are used interchangeably, 'role' has broadened to incorporate a description of a status and the behavioural standards

associated with it. Roles are considered to give reference to expectations on an individual(s) ascribed a particular status (George drawing on Linton, 1936). Understanding transition from within a life course perspective sharpens focus upon the processes an individual passes through across their life course. In particular, the life course perspective underlines the prominence of time in sequencing both life course phases and transition. Heinz et al. (2009, following Abbott, 2001 in *Time Matters*) describe a reciprocal relationship between life phases, and associated transitions, from within historical time (social and economic conditions), institutional time (social policy-related regulations and provisions), and individual time (biographical decisions enacted by the individual concerning their life course activities).

In tracing transitional outcomes amongst youth cohorts, life course sociology turns attention towards how transitions enacted are not as linear or predictable as they once were. This de-linearity of life course transitions shifts the goalposts in terms of recognised signifiers of adulthood, and associated notions of what dependence or non-dependence represents. Exploration of 'transition' as a conceptual device, therefore, bring into view additional complexities involved in researching the experience of key transitional points across the life course. As aforementioned, representations of transitioning youth evolve from status ascription tied to notions of an eventual, future non-dependent adult role. Wyn and White (1997) highlighted the nature of these roles through depicting how youth is perceived as reminiscent of a state of becoming an adult. The role descriptors of youth relative to behaviours associated with an adult status is expressed in Table 1.

Table 1: Role ascriptions associated with youth and adulthood

Youth	Adult
Not adult/adolescent	Adult/grown up
Becoming	Arrived
Pre-social self that will emerge under the right conditions	Identity is fixed
Powerless and vulnerable	Powerful and strong
Less responsible	Responsible
Dependent	Independent
Ignorant	Knowledgeable
Risky behaviours	Considered behaviour
Rebellious	Conformist
Reliant	Autonomous

Source: Wyn and White, 1997: 12.

In highlighting role ascriptions typically cast as enabling youth to become an adult, Wyn and White do not explicitly denote role descriptors as belonging within particular generational 'youth' cohorts here. Instead, a case is made regarding the discursive separation of 'youth' from the emblematic characteristics apparent in becoming an 'adult'. For instance, youth reflects period of seeking to become an adult; adulthood defines becoming something else and having arrived. An additional caveat in the conceptualisation of life course transition(s) is their empirical stability. Which transitional markers enable the process of becoming something else shifts over time between cohorts of particular generations. These shifts redefine particular role statuses and mean life course periods are more differentiated than were previously encountered due to temporality, place, and social status. This further conceptual challenge is a consequence of, for instance, the expansion of lifelong learning within education systems that are no longer the prime domain of the child and young person (see for example, Ecclestone et al., 2010). A further example is the evolving trend within the private sphere of the family in relation to extending dependency into the 20s (for instance, Jones, 2009).

These generational cohort shifts encourage reasoning that transitions historically aligned with a youth phase in modern industrialised societies (that is, those that are made and negotiated up and towards the status of adulthood) are less predictable than those across other age-banded cohorts (George, 1993). These peculiarities arise particularly in relation to youth as perceptions and markers of what constitutes adulthood have a tendency to evolve historically. These notions of transitioning towards, and reaching markers associated with,

adulthood are also no longer strictly relevant to youth, or young adults (Jeffs and Smith, 1998). This de-linearity of life course transitions shifts the goalposts in terms of recognised signifiers of adulthood and associated notions of dependence or non-dependence. Explorations of transition as a conceptual device, therefore, bring into view additional complexities involved in researching the experience of key transitional points across the life course. This is particularly vivid within a biographical approach that has a tendency to bring to the fore enactment of individual agency in the purview of life choices presenting. Biographical research has highlighted how *choice, chance and opportunity* shape young peoples' transitional orientations in view of their biographies (see for example, Thomson et al. 2002 and Henderson et al. 2007).

This study, however, will not simply chart a young persons' negotiation of their biography in view of presenting choices, chances and opportunities. Instead, the study aims to contest the conceptualisation of 'transition' through the exploration of sense making ascribed to transitional experiences within the biography. It will be argued that the concept of transition presents as an epistemological fallacy due to the vague framing of it as a process lacking ontological relativity and connectivity. In theorising these inherent complexities, the ascribed dynamics can and have been conveyed in broader transition and youth-related research (as will be explored in Section 3.2.). Academic and policy preference for outcomes-related research (supported by life course studies) subsumes the experiential, and any divergences in these experiences, through focus on the activities of sizeable cohorts of youth with reference to their life course journeys and attributed successful negotiation.

2.5. Is it a transition? Is it a trajectory? Or is it a social pathway?

Section 2.4 has introduced empirical studies of transition as having genesis within perspectives of the life course. A literature review of 'youth transitions' allude to transition as occurring within trajectories or pathways, the forthcoming subsections will discuss these terms. Trajectories exist as an aspect of temporal processes, as they represent social measures or orientations of stability and change over a period of time (George, 2003). As Elder (2009: 98) elucidates 'transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning'. As such, transition can be observed as having origin in particular trajectories within a life course phase in a broad sense. For instance, it may be usual for a transition to occur in childhood, young adulthood, or older adulthood. Concerning the youth study and policy arena, transition may be applied interchangeably with trajectory or pathway. For instance, when social policy conveys a requirement to support transition, this can be taken to represent a whole trajectory or pathway aligned with a requirement for adulthood. This is despite acknowledgement that transition is a socially situated phenomenon experienced in its multiplicity across all life course domains, or that we all are in a process of perpetual transition (Quinn, 2006). The following subsections will help elucidate why confusion of these life course concepts renders notions of youth and transition a nebulous marriage.

2.5.1. Trajectories and transition

Transition within a trajectory is observable in biographical research as events or turning points from which the individuals' role status changes into another. Transitions that are readily observable, and therefore predictably framed, tend to occur within the sphere of

education and employment. Coles (1995) extends this notion in relation to youth and modelled young peoples' transitions in terms of *careers* - trajectories existing as sequences of various statuses through which they pass - that signify and initiate the phase of adulthood. Coles highlighted that the successful attribution of adulthood status would depend on engagement with the following transitional types: a transition from full-time education and training to labour market activity (school to work transition); the transition from family of origin to family of destination (domestic transition); the transition from residence with parental figures to living independently (the housing transition). Experience of these transitions, Coles summarises (1995: 8), '…sets in train a series of social processes' having the potential 'to *determine* the likely course of a young person's future status sequence'. In this sense, trajectories certainly highlight alignment with temporality in the life course. The conceptual vagueness of transition, however, precipitates the connotation that trajectories represent a period of time within which automatic progression will occur upon linear and predictable transitional movement.

Galland (1996) confers that traditional sequencing of young peoples' careers are increasingly delineated. However, this lack of linearity represents incongruence between the 'two axes' of trajectories towards adult independence (in Doray et al., 2009: 7). These axes are: the public axis, inclusive of compulsory education, work or further/higher education, and the start of a career trajectory; and, the private axis of family life, independent living, and long-term partnerships and parenthood. Galland (translated in Doray et al., 2009) explains that these sequences occurred more or less simultaneously, this has become fragmented since the 1950s due to individual postponement of various transitions signifying adulthood.

However, conceptualisations that focus upon transition as being representative of turning points, change, and movement to another status, readily infer that transition dynamics always involve forward momentum and transference. Thus, whilst there is recognition of transitions taking a linear course across a trajectory towards adulthood, research also refers to enactment of transition markers that may or may not follow a linear sequence, but can be experienced at any time in the 'youth' phase or early (or even later) adulthood (Shanahan, 2000).

Transition research concerning children and young people tends to be dominant within education studies and focuses upon one-off transitional events, such as the first time a child attends a secondary school (Vogler et al., 2008; Ecclestone et al., 2010). Petriwskyi et al. (2005), however, have highlighted a shift in empirical research since the 1990s. Research now seeks to explore the multiple transitions children and young people face. Transition dynamics involve linked transitional event(s) over a course of time with experiences of continuity and discontinuity (even across one trajectory, such as an education pathway). Research on children's educational transitions has emphasised how transition can involve contextual movement and change between institutions, and posit that transitions can be experienced horizontally or vertically (Kagan and Neuman, 1998; Lam and Pollard, 2006). Horizontal transitions would concern day-to-day transition dynamics occurring within a particular time frame between various health, education and social institutional settings a child or family may need to be involved in. In contrast, vertical transitions refer to movement between institutions along a trajectory (for example, family life whilst children remain legal dependents). This research shows that transition can involve a proliferation of movements

or change at a particular juncture or over a trajectory within the life course. What remains consistent is that transitional periods are 'usually a time of intense and accelerated development demands that are socially regulated' (Lam and Pollard, 2006: 125), and occur between movement from one setting to another until the child and family are integrated into another setting.

The 'youth' period of the life course may highlight similar dynamic qualities in relation to transition, but the experience of transition and trajectories would clearly take a different shape. Indeed, as James and Prout (1997: 248) observe, youth transition is a process stretching over 'considerable periods of time rather than being concentrated into ritual moments'. This process is also reminiscent of a constant reversal of earlier transitions that can be encumbering or positively embraced. When Lam and Pollard (2006), for instance, discuss the institutional governance of transitioning they would refer to legal parameters into which education transitions must occur in childhood. For transitioning youth, educational transitions may or may not occur. If they do, it will typically be in a less restricted time span, and possibly through their own negotiation consistent with the young person's identity and aspirations (Biggart, 2009; Ecclestone et al., 2010).

In a general sense, transitioning across the child or youth life phase show qualitative differences in how they are precipitated, enacted and experienced. According to Cowan (1991), the transitional phases of children (including the biographical and social parameters associated with being a young person, but legally a child) are invariantly sequenced and have an observable quality in all cultures with clear qualitative differences between transition

phases. Childhood transition is also underpinned by synchronous development and dynamic equilibrium across the phases. Therefore, particular transitions sit hierarchically and integrate the whole rather than replace stages. It appears that the relative ambiguity of transitional dynamics in relation to young adults is explainable through the discursive casting and instability of the concept of youth.

Perhaps most importantly, Cowan (1991) argues that transition for both children and adolescents tend to just happen, and are therefore not commonly perceived as being within individual control. However, for youth there is a tendency for the dynamic to awaken a particular expectation of decision making upon a pathway. Thus Cowan (1991: 8) posits that the transitions of the child/young person and young adult/youth are distinguishable through the expectation of whether to 'participate in determining the direction of his or her life journey', rather than biographical and social markers as being affective of change. Here is where the situated experience of young people diverges in line with the individual biography, and whether the young person is able to continue educational transitions, or others (Chapter Three will further discuss the interception of biographical agency). Moreover, these different situated experiences broaden the conceptual nature of transition to consider how transition is anticipated, unexpected, or simply not realised when expected (Goodman et al., 2006). However, particular exemplars of transition remain observable as 'youth transition' due to notions of cohort relativity upon identified trajectories.

2.5.2. Pathways and transition

The reoccurring argument that transition lacks conceptual definition reflects how youths' transitional experiences are aligned with individual choice upon identified trajectories. These choices transpire upon social pathways across particular trajectories. Scabini et al. (2006) distinguish between the framing of transitions across traditional and contemporary societies. In traditional societies, they suggest, transitional experience are discretely observable as momentous leaps signifying cultural rites of passages into a new social status. However, in a contemporary setting, transitioning is understood to be negotiable as individual endeavours, with little symbolic acknowledgement and synthesis into a culturally defined social placing. Thus, 'an automatic passage has been transformed into a path of transition' defined by 'its own processes and timing' (Scabini et al., 2006: Introduction). A *path of transition* brings the concept of pathways into view as existing as a series of prescribed transitional states upon a particular trajectory, distinguishable as key events.

In many ways, pathways provide structure to the stepping-stones (or transitions) experienced within a particular trajectory. In drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) conception of trajectories as fused within social fields, Doray et al. (2009) highlight how pathways are observable as socially ascribed and determinable. Pallas (2003: 168) positions pathways as 'well-travelled sequences of transitions', but in doing so contrasts a pathway as 'an attribute of a social system' to a trajectory representing 'an attribute of an individual'. For example, an education pathway can proliferate into a series of new status changes via transitional pathways that children and young people must engage in due to legislatively ascribed pathway formation, giving rise to *social pathway*. Whilst a trajectory as an individualised

temporally-bounded dynamic highlights how individuals time a series of transitional experiences, for example, when they enter post-compulsory education or become married.

The concepts of trajectory and pathways thus open up distinctions and overlaps between transitional experiences structured through social institutions upon pathways – such as educational trajectories - and the social trajectory of family life as existing in an individual and private field (Giele and Elder, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984). It is clear from the current study that transition itself is a dynamic concept, with associated trajectories and pathways existing as multidimensional facets within a life course. A key theme linking the conceptualisation of youth and transition, as reflected in the previous sections, is that there are challenges in analysing the ontological significance of transitional experiences within pathways and trajectories towards adult independence. The dynamics that have been observed in relation to transition give rise to normative role statuses demarcating youth and adult independence, and assumptions are quickly made about what transition entails for youth due to conceptual ambiguity. Semantically, notions of transition can suggest constant underpinning principles and experiences consistent across most life course phases. However, the discursive placing of youth as a liminal phase in the life course raises questions about, as the thesis argues, the epistemological fallacy of being in transition, and the possibilities for the representation of this in policy or in individual narratives.

2.6. Concluding remarks on the youth (in) transition episteme: Conceptual stasis and the 'missing middle' in youth studies

A consensus that has burgeoned in academia relates to how youth transition studies rigidly de-prioritises young peoples' accounts of their lives (Miles, 2000; MacDonald, 2001; France, 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007; Stokes and Wyn, 2007, and others). Upon review of the youth study literature, a common departure in this consensus is the weight given to the influence of structure in shaping transitional experience, and the agency those on the cusp of 'adulthood' have in actively negotiating their transitions. Debates within the field have become circular. For instance, there are arguments suggesting structural influences and patterns of inequality amongst youth cohorts are over-stated, at the expense of understanding transitional experience within youth subcultures. Moreover, alternatively, there exists too much or little focus upon youth subcultures, to the detriment of understanding structurally derived inequality. On the other hand, coming full circle, there is weighty focus upon structural constraints, which subsumes understanding of individual agency. However, transition, as a conceptual apparatus, remains a useful vanguard in understanding young peoples' experiences as it at least provides, and has provided, a conceptual lens to enable empirical research.

In the quest to seek understanding of how cohorts of youth fare with respect to particular trajectories, and which young people may deviate from common social pathways, recent debates inform us that youth transition study is insufficient. Roberts (2011: 34), in particular, purports that current debates do not '…account for the lack of homogeneity among young people'. Instead, there is a dominant focus upon processes associated with the promise of successful trajectory orientations, or ones with the potential for exclusionary outcomes.

Momentum has gathered apace around the proposition of a paucity of knowledge concerning the experience of young people who appear to be 'getting by' (Roberts and MacDonald, 2013: 1.4). There is concern that empiricism oscillates between youth cohorts that are most vulnerable to exclusionary transition experiences and an interest in those that are achieving to degrees constructed as successful. Therefore, this suggests there is a lack of knowledge concerning young people who fall below the radar, which could enhance understanding of the cultural context into which contemporary youth experience transition. It is argued that this understanding could demonstrate fresh insight into why particular transitional characteristics are deemed problematic, or otherwise, in policy terms (France, 2007; Roberts and MacDonald, 2013).

The mainstream and everyday experiences of young people in contemporary society are thought to be excluded. Roberts and MacDonald argues there to be a lack of consideration regarding the reach of social inequality and exclusionary experiences resulting from transitional outcomes. Alternatively, they also argue, what constraints young people 'getting by' face in relation to striving towards successful transition is misunderstood. A broader theoretical repertoire of the youth period would certainly have saliency considering weighty focus upon transitional pathways. However, this thesis argues that the conceptual conflation of somewhat equally ambiguous notions of 'youth' with 'transition' is the hindrance to empirical understanding. Of further significance to this thesis, despite an acknowledged focus upon precarious transitional experiences, conceptual debates on understanding youth transition may prove ineffective at helping to illuminate understanding of context-dependent transition across a young persons' life course. A review of the literature for this

study suggests that policy impetus, and a directed focus upon problematic or successful transitional outcomes, in many ways guides youth study to hone in on particular 'groups' of youth in view of their pathways. The body of knowledge concerning care-experienced young peoples' experiences tends to be precipitated by their perceived vulnerability and propensity to risk. To this end, this thesis aimed to draw out the meanings ascribed to their transition, instead of defaulting to debates regarding the characteristics of their pathway experiences.

Youth study, as implied, has lost sight of the 'ordinary' experience of youth and further problematised the transitional period in its polarisation between young people at risk of social exclusion and others. This is said to constitute a *missing middle* of knowledge about youths' meaning of their lived transitional experience (as per the thesis of Byrne, 2005; France, 2007; and, Roberts, 2011). The missing middle is constitutive of polarisation in knowledge of experience of youth transitions that turn attention to 'fast and slow lanes to adulthood' (Bynner et al., 2002 in Roberts, 2011: 22). This temporal aspect to transition inculcates interest in the ability for young people to navigate pathways whilst delaying certain transitions (such as, leaving home) in order to experience 'youth'. Somewhat specific to this thesis, care leavers' transitioning experience is considered to exist within the 'fast lane', in ways mainstream youth do not experience. Or, specifically as experiencing 'accelerated and compressed' transitions (Stein, 2006) with an expectation of immediate adulthood upon leaving care due to their perceived familial, social and economic vulnerability (Wade and Dixon, 2006; Broad, 2007; Mendes et al., 2011b). This thesis does not attempt to reject these notions of transitional vulnerability, and that care-experienced young people amongst the youth cohorts whose experiences are justifiably explored due to

risk of social dislocation. However, the prevailing trend to discuss care-experienced young people in the purview of risk, vulnerability and social exclusion - and the degree to which their resilience is shown to help them overcome the odds (see for example, Stein in 2006) - subsume both a broader and nuanced understanding of transitional experience of their youth phase.

The following chapter will further unpack the dynamic qualities of transition and ground the youth study literature to highlight the key emphases in transition-relevant study, these may challenge the assumptive reality of representations of youth in transition. The chapter will highlight how youth transition research tends to render young peoples' biographical orientations as individualised, normative socio-political sequencing of desired transitions in which individual negotiation equates with successful or failed transitional experience. Conceptualisations of transition related to youth are changeable with dynamical emphases presenting across particular epochs. This dynamism is to be highlighted through a selection of eminent debates within the youth study field. Conceptual issues relating to transition(s) have been introduced across this chapter, which foreground subsequent theoretical positions to understanding transitioning youth of further consequence to this thesis. The related development of a transition biography as a methodological device for understanding transition in this study will also be introduced.

CHAPTER THREE - TRANSITION AND THE YOUNG PERSON'S BIOGRAPHY

3.1. Chapter introduction

Chapter Three will seek to consolidate the conceptual nuances presented in the previous chapter and address the question of how we may understand youths' transitional orientations in relation to their biographies. Chapter Two has highlighted youth and transition to be dynamic concepts, each with their particular ontological bases through which a life course perspective explores their characteristics. It will extend this reasoning further through situating this study in relation to Evans and Furlong's (1997) thesis offering metaphors of youth transitions through their historical and sociological expressions. A further section will highlight how the *youth as navigators* metaphor has infiltrated social policy prescription, presenting a dominant metaphor for policy understanding of young peoples' transition.

The previous chapter pointed to an epistemological fallacy surrounding young people in transition due to the discursive placing of youth as a liminal phase in the life course. The concept of *liminality* will be explored to garner how anthropological understandings of experiencing transition may, on the contrary, be of benefit. This chapter aims to foreground the empirical findings that draw on notions of linked lives through the developed concept of a transition biography. This chapter will thus further ground the theoretical basis for the thesis.

3.2. Metaphors of youth transitions

Evans and Furlong's 1997 paper that traced metaphors of transition shift attention to the discontinuities in understanding transitional experience. The ascription of metaphors of youth transition – niches, pathways, trajectories or navigations - attribute dynamics that have shifted through time representing understandings of transitional experience .

3.2.1. Niche youth transition

The 'niches' metaphor refers to an apparent 'golden age' of post-War youth transitions amid clearly defined routes offered via educational and social security policies within a developing economy (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Within this 'golden age' young peoples' journeys were tightly embedded within the rewards of education and job opportunities for school leavers afforded by economic stability (Ashton and Field, 1976; Furlong, 2009). Transitioning youth within the golden age filled society's niches. Transition-related research was stimulated by psychological and developmental approaches, which highlighted how career niches were attainable through mature progression and accomplishment linking to an established adult identity. Further to this proposition, was an orientation towards homogenising the youth experience predicated on the belief that youth of the same classed background filled particular niches (Roberts, 1975 in Furlong, 2009).

3.2.2. Pathways; transitioning cohorts

The so-called golden era lost its footing due to the identification of social inequalities amongst youth attributable to worsening economic conditions. In particular, studies tracing school to work transitions in the 1970s, during time of economic changes and rising youth

unemployment, turned attention towards a polarisation amongst cohorts. Young people transitioning in the domestic sphere from middle class home, with greater financial capital, were said to be experiencing 'extended careers' (Ashton and Field, 1976) These extended careers were characterised by educational and employment trajectories enabling them to seek professional occupations through educational pathways. During this timeframe, understandings of transitional experience were held back through methodological approaches that failed to capture the complexities involved in life course processes. This methodological oversight, as Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) infer, underplay the degree of risk and uncertainty youth experienced amid rapid social change. Whilst Vickerstaff (2001: 3) also suggested notions of transitional linearity are somewhat overplayed, she concedes a relative 'homogenisation of possible pathways' could equal less pressure for young people to 'design their own trail'.

3.2.3. Trajectories; problematic or successful transitions

The problematisation of young peoples' transitions seeped into youth study. This problematisation was expressed in view of structural inequalities, particularly relating to access to opportunity to progress to adulthood with secure employment, living circumstances, and so on (Furlong, 2009). However, Stokes and Wyn (2007) later argued that an understanding of transitions as being increasingly complex proliferated in view of the past myth of unproblematic linearity. These shifts subsumed understanding of lived experience in favour of 'bland discussions…commonly of trends in employment and education patterns' (Miles, 2000: 10). As a consequence, 'trajectory' was deemed the predominant metaphor underpinning the experience of transitioning youth with the inference that structural

factors, such as class, overrode individual agency across particular trajectories towards adulthood.

3.2.4. Youth as transitional navigators

During the 1990s and beyond, the metaphor of 'navigation' came to the fore in youth study. Transitioning was viewed as occurring within individual biographical projects. As such, the youth field begun to ground empirically the importance of individual traits such as resilience and decision making (Furlong, 2009). The idea of youth experiences being traceable through the notion of 'choice biographies' (following du Bois Reymond 1998, as interpreted in Furlong) underpinned the metaphor of youth as transitional navigators. The choice biography represents the proliferation of choices afforded young people, and is said to have evolved because of processes of social change expanding avenues towards adulthood. Leccardi (2005) claimed the experience of youth became subjectified as a young person's ability to apply their experiences, life skills, and resources to make future decisions is promoted ahead of other explanations.

The next section will extend these notions of a youth transition as a biographical project. It will further highlight the imperative of a fresh perspective on biographical orientation that further integrates into this social policy-related thesis the notion that the concepts of youth (in) transition is a problematic conflation.

3.3. Social policy and biographical orientation: The problem with agentic futures

Underpinned by conceptual ambiguities that the youth experience is precarious and subject to derailment, youth and transition already evokes an individualised process of moving through life. A focus upon the experience of transition as the dominant dimension in a life course phase ignores the situated context transitioning young people find themselves in. The *youth as navigators* (Evans and Furlong, 1997) perspective of transitioning places emphasises an uncertain future, wherein political rights to welfare and social participation are the sole reserve of attaining an adult status. The saliency of the dominance of the biographical youth metaphor shows in how it has infiltrated social policy support frames for care-experienced youth. Whilst individualisation in essence places the person's agency as central, the advent of neo-liberal economics has facilitated modes of governance and policy requisites, which order the life phases of the individual into functional spheres (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). These functional spheres unwisely give primacy to transitioning seamlessly in a social life that is naturally complex. These issues are compounded by youth sociology's fixed understandings (in particular, those tied to observing modes of structure and agency within biographical projects), and further embeds limited forms of knowledge construction of what characterises the experiences of young people (Gillies, 2000).

The broader social policy themes evident in the England and Melbourne context, seeks the enhancement of young peoples' pathway-planning competencies into their post-care futures, to shape that independent young person. Therefore, the review of the literature suggests, youth policy is entrenched in metaphors for understanding youth transitions that may hold little saliency to young peoples' biographical experiences and their expressions

into the present. According to Cohen (1997) in *Rethinking the Youth Question*, these structurally ascribed political and economic prerequisites, which conflate autonomous individuality with adult independence, create an imagined and unified 'youth' identity. This is despite young peoples' biographical orientations being embedded and situated in their lived social context (as this thesis explores). The review of the literature has highlighted those current conceptualisations of youth transitions hinge on an increasingly complex socialisation process centering on the internalisation of the goals that are culturally associated with adult status and citizenship. As such, 'the timing and duration of transitions between childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age are less age-dependent and demand a series of individual decisions' (Heinz, 2009: 3). In other words, standard biographical patterns that once broadly categorised youth as preparation for work, adulthood as work activation and old age as retirement are redundant. The biography is now thought to have lost its rooting in linearity and is characterised by fragmentary trajectories consistent with stamps and markers of identity. Thus, the variance of transitional experience amongst cohorts is acknowledged, yet sociological literature remains interested in biographical orientations with respect to modes of structure and agency.

Tracing biographical processes provides a useful window to understanding transitional orientations across time. However, the interception of idealised social pathways stamps a futuristic tone to youth transitions, one linking the experience of being young to an idea of becoming and succeeding as an independent adult. Social policies in particular areas concerning youth has therefore increased its normative regulation. Leccardi (2005) highlights how the individual young person is viewed as an autonomous leader in their own

life project. This ascribed autonomy places emphasis on personal decision making, however, the impact of decisions is questionable in particular contexts:

> *Biographical construction requires skill, flexibility and the ability to 'sniff the air', to not miss an occasion, a chance, the unexpected; to transform the latter, when it appears, into an opportunity from which to benefit. Even if chance is referred to as a biographical arbiter, in reality time-of-life is governed, and the ability to turn chance into an existential opportunity is highly valued (Leccardi, 2005: 131).*

Leccardi's research helpfully underlines the significance of the presence of opportunity to young peoples' biographical orientations. However, she points towards how young peoples' narratives of the future convey an acceptance that trajectories are uncertain and constructively disconcerting. A contrast to the proposition that constructs of an uncertain future is anxiety provoking to youth is apparent in the research of Woodman (2011). He evaluates that ambiguous temporal orientations do not necessarily lead to a sense of a disenfranchisement with the future. Instead, he posits, future uncertainty is likely to act at a 'preconscious affective level…experienced to varying degrees' (Woodman, 2011: 126). Moreover, Woodman argues against the proposition that biographies of choice underpin young peoples' transitional orientations as planned life projects. Woodman's argument runs against a general theme in life course research highlighting agency in the biography as an exertion of *planful competence* developed in adolescence, one facilitating self-controlled processes that lead to the negotiation of institutional relations and interpersonal relationships (Clausen, 1995).

Henderson et al. (2007) highlight transitions are not faced solitarily in the context of young peoples' individual biographical traits. Instead they highlight that transitions are also met, and responded to, within the dynamics of family relations, community and societal structures. Indeed, as du Bois-Reymond and Blasco (2003) suggest, 'successful' negotiation of young peoples' transitions relates to support received through the family, along with the opportunities or restrictions within social policies that relate to, for example, education, gender and ethnicity. Across the Henderson et al. *Inventing Adulthoods* (2007) study 'critical moments' were present in many young people's narratives of transition, characterised by key transitional events within which a young person's resources, rather than individual agency, were pinpointed as significant in the mediation of potentially negative implications. Essentially, these critical moments occurred beyond the sphere of individual agency, and were largely attributed to formal structural issues (such as, issues within the school system) and family circumstances (such as, changing homes, parental illness). An individualised focus also therefore eschews understanding of other alternative stimuli for the choices made during transition. These stimuli may include seeking employment that links to their perceived capacities and interests, exploring sexualities, and moving from peer groups and youth cultures to forming identities independent to these (du Bois-Reymond and Blasco, 2003).

In addressing the proposition that today's youth can be somewhat lost in transition, an argument can be made, as per the words of Joe, a participant in the current study, that 'you are only as strong as your weakest link':

> *…children and young people may be understood as being particularly vulnerable to the decisions of others, having limited autonomy, and depending on others for both their 'ontological security' as well as more practical matters of housing, care and financial support. But such dependency can be positive. For example, the passage of a middle-class child can be eased in the 'slipstream' of their parents' status and achievements. In contrast the turbulence resulting from a chaotic family and economic life can not only hinder progress, but may even prove dangerous in itself, forcing young people into premature independence (Thomson et al., 2002: 338).*

The other side of the perspective presented above is that children and young peoples' existing 'autonomy' from premature independence is founded on the scope of reliance on others. This assertion somewhat parallels Bourdieu's (1993) view that young people have limited autonomy in their internal belief and decision making capabilities. However, Bourdieu's (1993) arguments are mostly indicative of a focus upon youth making their formative transitioning. This confusion highlights a theoretical sticking point, an ambiguity about age chronology and meaning attributed to being 'young'. Roberts (2003) has identified that ambiguities of this nature leaves sociologists abandoning trying to attribute age-boundaries to young people and youth. As a rejoinder, Roberts (2003: 8) claims that 'we [sociologists] study youth transitions which may occur at age 12, 16, 20, 30 or even when individuals are older than this'. Robert's (2003) reasons that whether 'adults' express their independence in terms of employment that supports an adult lifestyle, through marriage or becoming a parent, or continuing to live in a parental home, remains a largely individual and circumstantial endeavour. Nevertheless, ring fencing the empirical study of youth transitions in terms of aged-brackets from teens until twenties is pertinent, as this is the time that most experience discriminatory processes in their status as young liminads.

As Section 3.2. highlighted, youth study employs the concept of transition to assess the influence of shifting social, economic and cultural dynamics that give shape to understandings of the youth condition (MacDonald et al., 2001). The consideration of evolving 'metaphors of youth transitions' in the previous section has helped elucidate why significance is placed upon the biographical orientations of young people. The guiding aim of this thesis suggests that this adoption perversely acts as a misrepresentation to young people as it expunges their self-ascribed frames of reference about their transitional experiences. Youth are considered to be *lost in transition* if they are not navigating trajectories and pathways of acceptable importance to becoming an adult, or are deemed particularly risky (see for instance, Smith et al., 2011; Lösel et al., 2012; Silva, 2012). Youth transition as representative of potential insecure and risky *liminality* is thus brought to the fore when young people are cast as lost in transition. This notion links to research involving uncommon trajectories (such as, care placements to the 'care leaving' process) and transitional movement between employment, mental health and criminal justice public services.

3.4. The development of the 'transition biography' concept

In the context of the preceding sections, the idea of a 'transition biography' is introduced as a lens through which the experiential nature of young peoples' transition may be discerned. This concept, developed to meet the study's aims, sought to 'open up' the individualised biographical lens on transition. It aimed to provide a sensitive framework for understanding the meanings young people ascribe to their own experiences, with view to appreciating the idea of *linked lives* within biographical representations. At the heart of the developed

'transition biography' concept is Pais's (2003) observation of 'post-linearist sociology'. This accepts that well-defined trajectories sequentially binding transitions toward adult independence are an unrealistic empirical oversight. Instead, experiences at points in the life course are 'guided by metamorphosis, multiplicity and reversibility' (Pais, 2003:115). It perhaps seems paradoxical that biographical explorations of transitions would offer more than a chronology of individuals' key moments. As a methodological choice, biographical research derive 'temporal visions that include present, past and future in the form of continuous and homogeneous time' (Pais, 2003: 120). However, exploring the experiential and relational aspects to the biography has potential to benefit transition research.

A connective theme across the literature review has been the notion that adult independence is an observed outcome of a youth phase. Blatterer (2007: 17/19) alludes to ascribed adult markers of independence, in particular 'living independently', as 'cultural typifications' acting as 'markers of inclusion just as much as they are points of discrimination'. One would expect that Blatterer's acknowledgment of typical cultural determinacy would suggest clearly defined *rites of passages* streamline young peoples' life journeys. However, he posits that:

> *…the practical, everyday taken-for-grantedness of adulthood is at odds with its conceptual indeterminacy. Neither official age grading nor the attribution of rights and obligations; neither biological characteristics nor psychological traits; neither formal nor informal age norms; neither fixed roles nor rites of passage can be drawn upon to delineate and therefore define adulthood. All these aspects [are] imperfectly integrated. Yet, in the social imagination adulthood remains the central stage of the biography… (Blatterer, 2007: 19).*

The case in point to a return to these conceptual tensions is to elucidate a potential frame of reference for understanding young peoples' biographical representations through appreciating the realm of young peoples' transitional experiences. The following section will therefore explore how the anthropological concepts of *liminality* and *rites of passages* (derived from van Gennep, 1960) can offer an exploratory backdrop to understanding individual past experience. Whilst also recognising the temporal dynamic of transitional unpredictability, and a proposed heterogeneity of experience within a newer epoch for transitioning youth. Although Pais' (2003) convincingly argues for a 'post-linearist sociology' that is able empirically to grasp the multicity of life course experiences, an appreciation of cultural rites of passages common to transitioning youth will be cautiously highlighted as beneficial.

3.4.1. The transition biography and liminality preceding independence

The concept of *liminality* represents a phase of the life course denoting youth as representing a process of becoming an adult member of a given society. Liminality embraces the notion that youth experience transition in a state of flux between childhood and adulthood statuses. Youth are thus represented as 'betwixt and between' status positions, before the social ascription of adulthood (Turner, 1987). Interestingly, these anthropological approaches to understanding life course phasing and transitions predate the imposition of sociological and policy interest in transitioning youth. However, on review of the literature, an anthropological appraisal of liminality can harness an exploration of the experiential nature of transition, as it does not necessarily impose a problematic lens to the experience of 'liminal youth'. In *The Rites of Passage* (1960), van Gennep observed ceremonies in non-

Western societies that symbolically demarcate transitioning experience between life course phases. van Gennep (1960) would observe the 'youth' phase of the life course to be a middle liminal phase preceding culturally specific rites of passages into a culturally defined adulthood status. Similarly, Turner (1987) conveyed the idea that initiations leading to new status ascriptions reflect a transitional process, as they are protracted liminal phases existing on the margins of well-defined moments into which a new status occurs.

Despite recognition that separation from constructions of childhood unto youth are experienced 'over considerable periods of time rather than being concentrated into ritual moments' (James and Prout, 1997: 248), the dynamics surrounding transition (as reflected in the work of van Gennep and Turner) are of significance to a transition biography. Cook-Sather (2006: 1) argues that Turner's application of liminality can 'refer simultaneously to one phase of the multi-step transition process effected through a rite of passage, the place within which that transition takes place', and can also evoke how the dynamic is 'experienced by the person making the transition'. To Turner (1987), the liminal phase is emblematic of a transitional experience through which, due to an ambiguous social status, it is not apparent what status an individual will become. Moreover, anthropological studies highlight how markers of adult independence, embedded in situated contexts into which young people transition, are aided through generational support and provide a certain anchorage in which transition occurs.

Anthropological frames can presume the following: that a period of beneficial (or essential) preparation and a supportive phase preceding assumption of a new status; that any

transition requires a period of adjustment between the separation phase and the rite of passage; and that an assumption of a new 'adult' identity will occur during a 'reincorporation' phase following non-status liminality. In following van Gennep's (1960) identified rites of passages phases, key transitions towards perceived adult independence involve a sequential series of events that accumulate in an identity shift. Autonomy from family-dependent states proliferates as a facet of identity, as a relatively stable status has been assumed, one that has the virtue of reintegration of rights and obligations defined in relations to others (van Gennep, 1960).

For contemporary young people, separation from a childhood status can be characterised by a transition away from child-like activities and more time spent with peers, but it is also suggested that there are fewer defined transitional initiations into adulthood. Cook-Sather (2006), for instance, outlined how assumptive the idea is that transitional experience is cogent with an initiation phase from which there is a synchronous observation of where a young person is to arrive or possibly become. Instead, she argues, any liminal transitioning phase should depart from a quest to observe a fixed self, but view the period as being emblematic of a time of questioning when an individual can develop his or her own sense of self. This departs from early anthropological studies that predate the late modern turn. This argument becomes apparent in van Gennep's description of an unambiguous and synchronous process of transitioning towards independence from a life course phase:

> *The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupational groups, progression from one group*

> *to the next is accompanied by special acts…transition from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence…For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass form one defined position to another which is equally well defined… (van Gennep, 1960: 2/3).*

Cook-Sather (2006) suggests a reframing on youth-related liminality reflecting greater appreciation of individual narratives of life as a cultural liminad. Northcote (2006) argues that an absence of clearly defined transitional initiations into adulthood means young people construct their own transitional rituals. Whilst Mahdi et al. (1987) and Blatterer (2007) highlight that the reintegration threshold into a new status is unclear for young people due to the ambiguous and differentiated notions of adulthood in contemporary society. They highlight, therefore, that young peoples' experience of transitioning towards independence is not socially arbitrated in terms of their relative role position to adults.

Indeed these theoretical arguments relating to liminality are consistent with notions of disembeddedness, which emphasise social interaction to be separated from localised relational contexts (Giddens, 1991). Whilst more recent research has explored how independence can be channelled through community networks. These networks are said to be able to provide young people with valuable support if they are vicariously transitioning into potential homelessness, from local authority care placements or through the experience of poverty (see for example, Hopkins, 2010, Cavalcanti et al., 2011, or Hicks et al., 2012). A growing body of research involving young peoples' independent identities (as reviewed by Jones in 2005 in a European context, and in 2011 by Cuervo and Wyn within Australia) denote independence as economic non-dependence upon parental figures. Current modes

of understanding liminality may posit that it represents a transitional period from dependency (at a separation phase), semi-economic dependency (during a liminal phase) and independent living (during a reintegration phase as an adult).

Bigart and Walther (2006: 41) instead argue for a distinction between 'dependency as a socio-economic concept and autonomy as a concept that is related to identity processes'. An understanding of dependency and independency, however, is difficult to separate from socioeconomic contexts in which young people transition. It is perhaps unhelpful to do so, as economic non-dependency may present as the most important symbol of independence to a young person. Of further interest, however, is how research focusing upon socio-economic measures may inhibit the cultural richness of generational affiliations, and so reduce the family unit as a system of resources from which young people emerge as independent adults (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Mason and Tipper, 2006).

3.5. Chapter summary

The preceding chapters have unravelled the mesh of discourses that embed social policy approaches and youth transition study. Current understandings of the experience of transition focus upon biographical processes consistent with mediating young peoples' perceived plight as opportunity seekers and decision makers amid an uncertain and potentially risky future. Metaphors offering a theoretical appraisal tracing the experience of youth over time have defaulted to a narrowed focus of young peoples' views on their transitional experiences in contemporary society. However a limited, yet developing, body of research evidencing the lack of temporal rigidity and variance in the dynamic of

transitioning, paradoxically opens up potential to stimulate a new metaphor for understanding the youth experience couched in relational terms.

This chapter has laid the ground for the discussion on the methodological orientation of this thesis. The incorporation of the concept of the transition biography will be detailed in relation to its identified methodological and analytical facets. The concept aims to bring a fresh perspective on the youth transition metaphor, one bridging the conceptual inarticulacy of youth (in) transition, as it will embrace a holistic understanding of young peoples' biography in view of their relational contexts. The methodological and analytical facets (detailed across the following chapters) steer the exploration of young peoples' own sense making of transitional independence through the developed concept of a transition biography.

CHAPTER FOUR - METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introducing the methodology

This chapter details how I have orientated the theoretical, ethical and practical bases of my research into an articulable methodology, namely a 'facet methodology'. The previous chapters highlighted how the academic and policy discourses surrounding youth can accentuate the problematic and individualised aspects of transition. I have inferred across the previous chapters that this represents a wholly reductionist appraisal of a vast array of experience, as it has embedded the notion that young peoples' lives are actively shaped by their own pathway-planning competence, when experience of transition is a reflection of a more complex relational dynamic.

The review of the literature posed epistemological constraints within the youth field that, in the context of my study, I felt were significant to explore through a contemporary methodological orientation, rather than to discount. These constraints, I argued, hinder nuanced understanding of transition dynamics, and so raise questions that have essentially underpinned my study's methodological orientation. These questions evoked methodological challenges in how to 'capture' and analyse the sample's narratives of experience without propagating the individualising, troubled socio-political narrative of being in transition. Questions that fell under the gaze of current conceptual understandings

of youth, and which are shrouded by the socially constructive nature of the concept existing as an 'artefact of expertise' (Kelly, 2000).

A methodology orientates any researcher into understanding the lives of their participants through particular adopted theoretical, data collection, and analytical frames (Tisdall et al., 2009). My approach to methodology was thus not serendipitous, but neither can it be said to have been crafted through a recursive process. My methodological orientation acted as a touchstone to enable me to understand the lived significance of the concepts of *youth, transition* and *linked lives* in the purview of leaving foster care. As such, my methodological approach gained apace with the choice of data collection methods seeking to derive and convey ethically the life stories and perspectives of the participants, and gathered refinement during the first phase of analysis of the participants' life stories.

Upon reviewing the literature and policy in the field of interest, I found the discursive casting of youth transition untenable as I felt it negated the self-representations of the young people and presented them merely as lay experts of their own lives. My guiding interests and research aims signified that a biographical, life story approach to data collection would enable an exploration of transitional experience across individual care trajectories. The data collection was primarily shaped, therefore, as a retrospective, longitudinal study (De Vaus, 2001) relying on the participants' individual biographical sensory and textual sources to forge a life history appraisal of transition. A life history comprises of a biographical case of one person who is at the centre of narrative evaluation of their life story (Bertaux and Delcroix, 2000). The epistemological status to life history is moulded by phenomenology, as

narratives represent a 'commentary of the individual's very personal view of his or own experience as he understands it' (Watson, 1976: 97). The phenomenological recounting of self and the individual's relationship to culture, structures, and others, is clarified by the social scientific paradigm into which the researcher locates itself. In *Documents of Life,* Plummer (2001) highlights how life history understandings can be reflected in, for example, discourse theory, semiotics, and psychodynamic approaches, amongst others.

The epistemological status of my approach to life history narratives derives from social anthropology and relational sociology, namely a relational epistemology. Each position seeks to enhance understanding of the interplay between culture, social relations and the individual (as highlighted by Donati, 2010 and Dépelteau and Powell, 2013). The adopted epistemological position, therein, considers that individuals' lived experiences are unjustly representable in view of their individual decision-making processes and actions. However, in essence, the epistemological status of life history narratives returns to its phenomenological roots, and the value of the approach in seeking to understand the other. With this in mind, my biographical research drew upon the principles of narrative inquiry to 'make present life experience and interpretations of life in a particular time and space' (Schiff, 2012: 1). Schiff (2012) describes that life experience is made present through how narratives act as sense making practices in the following interlocking ways. Firstly, narratives are declarative in giving presence to subjective experiences; secondly, narratives are expansive temporally in giving meaning to a person's past, present and future; and, thirdly, narratives are spatial-social, with narrated stories enmeshed through co-creation of the shared and divergent understandings people have when making sense of lived experience.

Studies concerning narrative inquiry often explore therefore, through collation of storied life histories, a collection of narratives offering cultural frames of commonly experienced life events (Atkinson, 2005; Aull Davies, 2008), whilst also showing promise to both capture and confront personal and dialogical truth constructs respectively (Dhunpath and Samuel, 2009). Therefore, drawing upon narrative materials for the purpose of this research, in the form of asking the participants to engage in structuring their life histories, opened up the potential to inform knowledge of the young peoples' constructs of the reality of transition and 'institutional' family relations.

On reflection, I have found that I adopted a stance that crosses over with that of Thomas (2010) who explored narratives of health and illnesses. Thomas proposes a necessary balance when exploring narrative material – a balance critically engaging in the broader sociological frames of the research in the context of individual narrations, one that critiques the romantic vision that the narrative 'voice' readily brings emancipatory power to the individual, and so accepts an 'ethic of care' whilst deriving storied data from participants. This balance, Thomas (2010: 657) argues, is crucial in the careful analysis and dissemination of the narrative form in informing in some way 'policy-related sociology', which consigns the views and interests of service users. In Section 3.4, I introduced the idea of a 'transition biography' as an empirical window to exploring the transitional experience of my participants. This concept was deemed helpful to open up, and de-individualise, biographical transitional orientations. The concept I developed respects the situated relational and socio-cultural dynamic to transition as existing as significant arbitrators to self-representations of independence and autonomy. As Atkinson (2005) and Brannen (2013) both observe, data

from individual narratives are not the panacea in understanding lived experience, instead the researcher should incorporate narrative 'talk' and the broader context into which social phenomenon plays out.

4.2. A facet methodology

Signposting here a methodological orientation named *facet methodology* - from research highlighting the multi-dimensionality of family interactions, resemblances and performativity conducted at the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life - enabled me to articulate my methodological preferences and direction in the purview of my developing understanding of the field. Facet methodology embraces a 'connective' and anti-reductionist ontology that views lived experiences as presenting in 'multidimensional, contingent, relationally implicated and entwined' realms (Mason, 2011a: 78). As ontologies philosophically anchor assumptions regarding the nature of existence and what can be known about it (Pascale, 2011), a connective ontology would infer a theorising of the 'entanglement of things' (Ingold, 2000: 258). This connective ontological position defies a related epistemological quest to empirically foreground the significance of theoretical dualisms unto lived experience. Ingold (2000) critiques the necessity to reconstruct and layer an individual life into biophysical, sociocultural, or psychological components, and to thus give provenance to dualisms like social/natural, macro/micro, and structure/agency in seeking to understand human experience. In contrast, ontological connectivity involves an epistemology that enables the researcher to create 'facets' to explore these intertwinements through intuitive reasoning about how a particular method derives knowledge of understandings of lived experiences. As Mason ruminates:

> *In facet methodology, the aim is to create facets that seek out the entwinements and contingencies, instead of approaching the world as though these things are separate, or as though the different registers of scale that social scientists sometimes like to apply analytically (e.g. micro/macro) are self-evidently meaningful in the experience of living (Mason, 2011a: 79).*

Facets, whilst substantive and methodological, do not denote a set of ideals through which lived experience is said to relate. Thus, methodological decisions are guided through seeking the 'entwinements and contingencies' to shift the provenance of particular binary assumptions in a field of interest. In keeping with this, facet methodology does not sit within clearly contained research paradigm(s), but is characterised as an acceptance that a blending of theoretical traditions precipitates various chosen methods to derive and analyse data. This respect for the 'history of ways of thinking' (Mason, 2011b) draws on aspects of ethnography, symbolic interactionism, interpretive sociology, amongst others, to guide understanding. Facet methodology is thus sympathetic to the hermeneutic circle when deriving knowledge, which is essentially representative of a dialogical, iterative movement between 'text' (for example, narrative forms) and 'context' (for instance, cultural frames).

In not embedding into paradigmatic ways of thought, understanding can be derived through the hermeneutic circle as it considers that the 'text' producing insight is created in relation to existing conceptual knowledge and theoretical assumptions (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). Facet methodology therefore expresses itself as an 'orientation and an approach, rather than a set of procedures that can be encapsulated into a framework or a recipe for research' (Mason, 2011b). The next section will bring into view the facets of the research

problematic, which is to understand the transition biography of the participants. This has followed an overview in Section 4.1 of how theory relating to youth and transition (as detailed across Chapters Two and Three) has guided methodological decisions

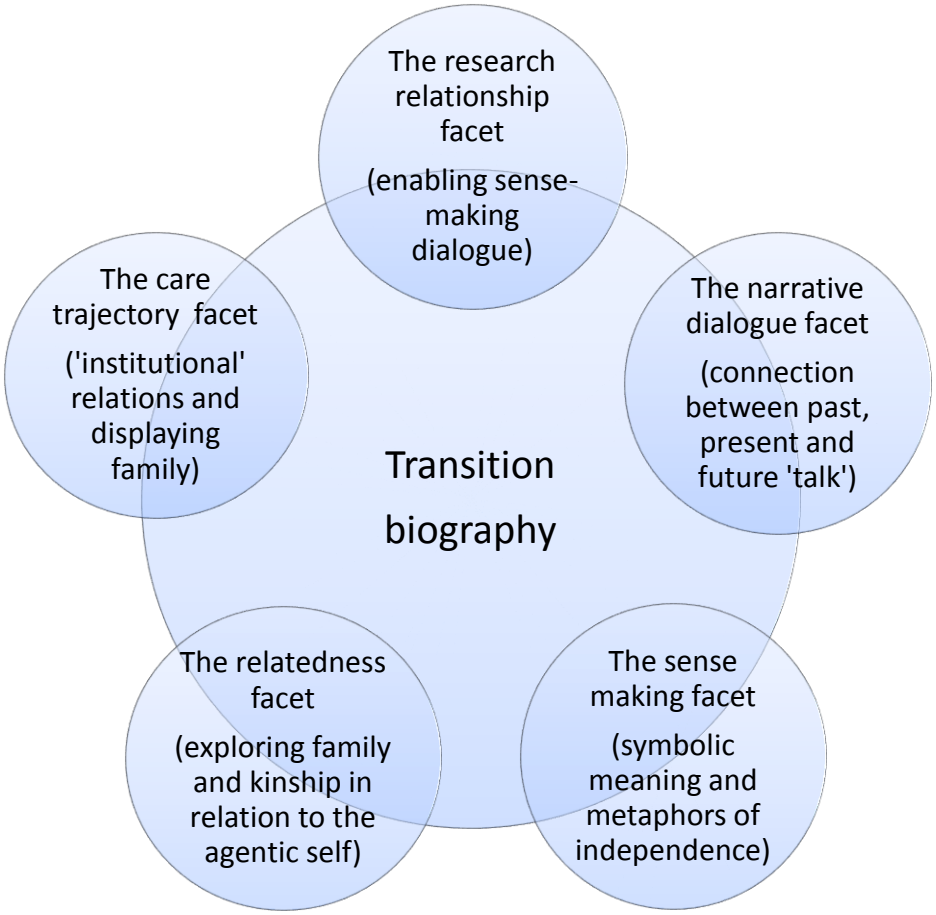
4.3. Exploring transitional experience: The presenting facets

The ethos behind the facet methodological orientation I found reflected in my research, particularly as, in drawing inspiration from mixed methods, the methodology nods towards both openness and pragmatism regarding data collection and analytical decisions. Facet methodology, as an exemplar of 'creative engagement across epistemologies' (Mason, 2011b), means the methodology can be described as context-led rather than formatively designed. The methodology seeks to draw upon imaginative and creative methodological processes to gain 'flashes of insight' into the research problematic of concern. To research interpersonal relational dynamics, the development of a facet methodology aimed to generate data to understand the 'critical associations' (relationships people deem to be of significance) presenting across experienced recollections of relationships, and how these may ebb and flow throughout the life course (Davies and Heaphy, 2011).

Mason (2011b) refers to the metaphor of a gemstone as representing the research 'object' - or research problematic and guiding aims - whilst the facets of the gemstone seek to capture evolving insight into the connective nature of lived experience. Through considering a facet methodology to advance and articulate my perspective and the orientation that has guided this research, I was able to discern the facets that allow for 'flashes of insight' in

understanding the dynamic nature of transitional experience, and the root metaphors young people use to reflect upon them. These facets are presented in Illustration 1 and relate to the explorative concept of a transition biography that I have developed. This concept developed with respect to how I positioned myself theoretically, the ethical stance I had, and the practical bases underpinning the study. The facets will be introduced and/or detailed across Chapters Four and Five.

Illustration 1: The facets of the transition biography



Facet methodology does not show provenance in any particular social research paradigm (Mason, 2011a). However through current research application, and by virtue, it is elevating narrative enquiry. Research knowledge derived from facet methodology is reflective of the narrative form, and is located in the iterative deliberation between text and context. This deliberation foregrounds both the research relationship and narrative dialogue facets. The methodology distinctly attempts to derive the 'personal, temporal, and contextual quality of connections and relationships' (Cole and Knowles, 2001: 19) whilst appreciating the contextual 'complexity and multi-dimensionality of personal associations' (Davies and Heaphy, 2011: 5). Narratives are employed to simply make sense of lived experience and, in the process of storytelling, it is anticipated that the participants' meaning making derived from their experiences is traceable within these narratives.

It is clearly the case that an individual's biographical material holds uniqueness to that person and cannot be entirely representative (Aull Davies, 2008). Particular 'facets' under scrutiny in this research sought to evoke the temporal and relational connections derived across the life stories within lived experiences of transition (amid institutional relations and family displays; via the care trajectory facet), and how these were made sense of into the present (amid other trajectories presenting to the young people; via the sense making facet). These connections are illuminated across the findings (Chapters Six to Eight). This facet drew on a pragmatic decision to incorporate mixed methods to induce the participants' sense-making in the context of their life story narration but, importantly, to provide the young people participatory 'ownership' over the process.

The data collection process was supported through sensory ethnographic principles that turn attention towards the human senses in experiencing and conveying these experiences to others (Pink, 2009). The idea to incorporate sensory ethnographic practice advanced due to ethical concerns regarding the impact upon the participants of being asked to provide an account of their life experiences. It was apparent, despite clearly stated informed consent processes (as shown in Appendix 1, 'participant information sheet'), that the unstructured nature of the process of narrative storytelling may have been confronting to potential participants. This contemporary ethnographic approach, therefore, encouraged the participants to construct their biographical material and self-representations on their own terms. Sensory ethnographic practices offer the promise that a researcher is enabled to 'engage with other people's worlds through sharing activities, practices and inviting new forms of expression' (Pink, 2009: 9). A sensory ethnography explores the use of the senses as a signifying process through which individuals experience their social environments and, as a result, form knowledge and representations of their environments, social relations, and individuality.

Sensory ethnographic practice introduced to my research a facet that helped evoke young peoples' sense making processes regarding their transitional experiences during the meetings and, consequently, acted in the main as a stimulus for the life story narratives. In essence, sensory ethnographic involved discussion of, for example, family photographs and items from childhood, and/or interactions with participants occurring within their chosen physical and social environments (to be further detailed in Section 4.4). Pink (2004; 2009)

refers to this enabling process as sensory elicitation, with concepts and meanings explored through physical, olfactory, visual, and tactile engagements to evoke memory and sense making of lived experience. I reasoned that this added an additional ethical layer to the research in my attempts not to draw out data framed by a somewhat unadulterated view of young peoples' individual decision making capability (this inspired the research relationship facet).

It is important to re-emphasise that 'facets' do not solely apply to the process of identifying orientating concepts and engaging in data collection methods, but show significance in both how the data is analysed and findings presented (Chapter Five will introduce the relevant facets). This process of augmentation of the facets enhances understanding of the interconnections of the research problem. Mason (2011a) observes that, consequently, facet methodology positions itself outside a *politics of method* grounded in employing research methods that maximises data generalisability of a descriptive kind. It was accepted that in placing the sample's life stories at the heart of the research, there was potential to divert away from an aim to evoke understanding of transition through representations of self in view of the relational context of lived experience. It was anticipated, therefore, that drawing upon sensory elicitation techniques had potential to extend individualised accounts to include the interconnectivities of transitional experience of interest to the study.

With the above in mind, I was not solely concerned with deriving data that highlights how transitions are experienced in situ, and would therefore be traceable in the sample's social

pathway navigations across a trajectory. As such, the inductive process of gathering and analysing data also developed particular facets of interest to the research problematic of understanding the dynamics of transitional experience (this will be further unpacked in Section 5.3 regarding the process of analysis).

4.4. Exploring the facets: Data collection methods

This subsection discusses the process of data collection; it highlights the discrete methods prescribed to induct data so to gather insight into the methodological facets identified. Appendix 2 introduces the profile of the sample (n=20), and highlights how participants engaged in the sensory ethnographic aspect of the data collection process. This degree of engagement will be discussed in this section regarding the type of method employed. Each life story was taken to represent a narrated connection between past, present and future temporal spaces to induce and illuminate sense making about transitional experiences. The constructed life story is taken to represent a transition biography of the participants. The methodological facets aim to evoke necessary conceptual understanding on the experiential, relational and sense making dynamics to transition in order to enrich the biographical life story accounts. A life story is thus, in simple essence, a method unearthing an account of a life and told to another.

During the process of recruitment, I asked the participants to bring to our meeting something significant to them that represented their past and present life, and their future

hopes. This strategy, which intended to offer a channel of support through which to construct the individual life story, opened up the possibility of various sensory-related elicitation methods. The array of material that was brought indicated the participants' enthusiasm for these methods to represent their lives. Importantly, however, the process of self-selection overcome issues relating to a lack of access to particular artefacts of their past (such as, family photographs). Therefore, I was glad to have opened up the potential array of elicitation methods through not specifying what to bring, or having a prescriptive list of tools to present to the participants. Due to the varied nature of the sensory material, questions or prompts during the life story interview were specific to the telling of each life story. Upon commencing the life story interview and the Dictaphone recording, I generally conveyed the following words:

> *As you know, I'm interested in how transition from care can be supported. I would like you tell me as much about your experiences of care as you would like. I'm keen to hear how you remember life in care, and how you feel your life has developed. I am just going to listen to you initially, whilst you talk through your items. I will then ask you questions if there is something I'd like you to talk more about, just for clarity on your story. Please take as much time as you need. You can start where you like. If you would like to stop at any moment, let me know.*

Here I highlight the nature of the life story method, how I left the structuring of the story open to the narrator in such a way not encourage the recounting of facts in a linear fashion. Whilst it was the case for a few of the participants that major key moments of their lives were presented in a rapid mini-biographical sense at the fore, it was most often the case that the sensory material enabled richer narratives exploring different aspects of identity and family/relational displays. Through the inherent meanings the young people ascribed to

their material, they conveyed aspects of their lived experiences and future hopes to another through the present. I thought this approach to method discouraged prosaic biographical presentations, and supported the principle of life story as narrative identification.

Sensory ethnographic practices were so integral to the telling and construction of these life stories (even for the participants that did not actively collate material beforehand) that I now intend to proceed and offer some necessary context. The following subsections will refer specifically to the incorporation and utility of each sensory-related method in the construction of the stories; the methods utilised for this process will be clustered.

4.4.1. Photographic image elicitation

A visual elicitation method involved deriving, and recording, narrative responses to photographic material the participants collated beforehand, or found in the course of the interview. Images referred to by participants included:

- Photograph albums containing images of time before care or upon episodic transitions back to birth family members - such as, photographs of first birth-family home, participants with birth parent(s), siblings, extended family, school friends, family pets, and family holidays

- Photographs of birth family into the present, images of younger siblings or nieces/nephews (some participants had not met), images of reunification with birth parent(s) and/or grandparents and extended family
- Photographs of people the participants stated were not part of their future, for example, birth family members, care professionals
- 'Memory books' containing photographs of time spent during trips and events organised by care-related agencies
- Photographs of foster parents and extended families, other children in residential care, or foster care siblings, photographs of other care leavers into the present
- Photographs of important age-related initiations, such as school graduation or debutante ball, or 'graduation' from time spent on placement in a care agency or 16-18 placement.
- Images of inspirational famous people or hobbies involved in, such as sport, live entertainment, and dance. Images of things found inspirational, for example, spiritual emblems, and Karate club members
- Images of places travelled to, where birth parents were brought up, images of place as a metaphor of feelings (London Underground Map)
- Photographs representing the future, including places wish to travel to, family members wish to forge relationship with
- Collage of 'past, present, and future' containing family photographs or images cut out of magazines

Of the 18 participants who alluded to photographic images, narrations were primarily framed around temporal significations (for example, childhood photographs may have symbolised the past in a time preceding entry into care). Through these significations, symbolic meaning and sense making of the experience would be channelled. This framing distinguishes the photographic elicitation method in its relationship to representing particular moments in time. Therefore, the photographic material comprised an array of overlapping or distinct significations of the past into a present projected onto the future. In this sense, I observed that the method incorporating photographs elicited distinct, but intertwined, narratives pertaining to lived experience across temporal spaces. The array of images prompted unique narrative episodes, so my direct questions or prompts intuitively differed, but centred on supporting the telling of the story and diverting attention onto another aspect of the images if their tone suggested the discussion needed to be eased. As the images often provided biographical contextual information, supporting the construction of the life story, frequently I would ask for clarity from participants regarding the point in time or significance of the image.

4.4.2. Participant-produced creative material

The participants had the opportunity for creative flexibility in how they represented their lived experiences and identity. Eight of the participants drew on creative material they had produced to help convey aspects of their life stories, with one participant designing a digital graphical representation of his life for the purpose of the interview. The mediums through which creativity was expressed included:

- Graphical visual presentation
- Penned poetic lyrics, which were rapped during the interview
- A letter written to long-term foster parents
- Digital and hand crafted artwork from school or college courses
- A website created for a college course
- Examples of writing from school where family life was represented
- A video snapshot of life produced and narrated by the participant.

The type of creative material provided contextual information relating to the biography, each medium also held deeper meaning to the telling and construction of the story. These mediums of self-expression offered non-invasive frames in which to express experiences and aspects of identity, and I believe elicited narratives that may have remained silenced during the interview. For instance, Hari's semi-autobiographical video diary snapshot presented a portrayal of life as a young person in his locale, with particular focus on vulnerabilities encountered through homelessness and substance misuse. The video also contained social and political commentary on the problems encountered finding employment and receiving support. Hari invited me to watch the video partway through this life story interview, at a point when the key moments in this life and care transitions had been conveyed. This form of elicitation provided a vehicle for discussing his interests and future, but importantly evoked deep narratives relating to his experiences as he was able to embed himself in that time of this life through the medium of his video.

4.4.3. Tactile and music-related items

Fourteen of the participants brought along tactile or music-related items they claimed were significant to creating representations of themselves and their lives. The tactile items included:

- Childhood mementos - such as, sport and dance trophies, certificates of achievement, presents from family members, school shirt signed by classmates, soft toys, birthday cards, letters from birth mother
- Items brought for a pregnant participant's baby
- Article containing inspirational quote
- Collection of ID cards from youth justice/treatment centres, travel books
- Hari's baby daughter, brought along 'to represent my future'.

These sensorial items (and baby) were embedded in some way to their biographies, and held a myriad of memories or ruminations on the future. They items evoked narratives of connections with family, kin and other relationships, or were shown as figurative representations highlighting how life has developed. Additionally, Callie played her favourite music track that was indicative of her feelings towards, and relationship with, her biological father.

4.4.4. Care case records

Blake, Hari and Venice brought along documentation from care proceedings presented as their 'care record'. This use of documentation evoked narrations reflective of how the records represented to them the factors behind entry into care, aspects of their care experience in particular placements, and interaction with care professionals. Each participant who referred to a care case record conveyed powerful narratives linking to their resolve at transcending the representations of their identity from within these records. The participants implied that they care records reinforced the notion that they lacked control over their destinies. In doing so, they conveyed that they now have emotional resolve and control over the portrayal of their lives, and they are no longer vulnerable or part of a system of care. The narratives of resistance stimulated by presenting and discussing the care records highlighted the depersonalised nature of care records. This idea supports findings from the *Who Am I?* Project that highlighted how care documentation is often, in essence, a professional procedural task aligned to compliance with policy, rather than brought together as a reflective resource for a child or young person (Humphreys and Kertesz, 2012).

4.4.5. Place and space: Walking and the 'sensory home'

It was important that I met with the participants in a place they felt most comfortable, and where it was convenient to do so. This opportunity enabled two data collection methods of significance to a study involving sensory ethnographic practice: the walking interview and the sensory home. The impromptu walking element that occurred across six of the interviews enabled an opportunity for four of the participants to get to know me and feel

more at ease before arriving at the interview destination. In the case of Hayden, it provided a break from the life story interview within a library to recollect his thoughts and tell me more about the area he was living in, this part of the interview was recorded upon permission. Walking in-between or from interview locations provided an opportunity for reflection upon day-to-day realities within the locale and to evoke thoughts on connections to their lived environments, whether they felt settled or insecure. It was only in the case of Hayden and Charlotte that a walking part of the interview was recorded as it intersected the meeting. Several interesting quotes were made during the process of walking with the other participants; these were written down following our meeting upon consent.

For practical reasons, and at the participant's request, I interviewed Eva, Leila and Zafar at home, whilst Alex and Tori were at home via video link. Pink (2009) alludes to this method of visiting participants homes in the process of collecting data as the 'sensory home', which has potential to induce narratives of everyday practices and meanings of home and its creation. Whilst the use of this method was not intended, it of course provoked significant narratives relating to independent identities and the importance of building a home upon leaving care. To Leila, the home interview allowed her to discuss her future and the preparations she had made for her baby (and to introduce me to her pet parrot!). Alex, on the other hand, remained at the home of a long-term foster carer, providing a level of comfort in the interview through which he could show me some of his possessions and talk through the transitional dynamics around his early years living with the family and beyond.

In describing the array of methods I ended up integrating into the fieldwork, I have highlighted the extent to which sensory ethnographic practice can enhance life story work to the benefit of narrative storytelling of lived experience, and so embedding into the story associated portrayals of self and relations.

4.5. The research relationship facet

> *I don't have a life story. I don't have a life to be honest. That's what I feel like. All your life, people control you, and now me controlling me is hard. Just ask me questions and I'll tell you everything. (Shannon)*

This section describes the fieldwork journey; gaining access to the participants in this study and the associated 'process encounters' that were necessary to recruit and involve care-experienced young people in the research. I refer here to process encounters; these relate to important ethical considerations regarding ensuring informed consent and the minimisation of any potential risk to my participants in the 'field'. These encounters laid the ground for how the research relationship would proceed. Further on in this section, I will reflect upon the fieldwork and what I would call 'situational encounters' that arose whilst collecting biographical material, of which the research relationship facet of the study had to mediate ethically to simply enable the life story telling. Firstly, I will introduce the recruitment procedure undertaken across the case sites within England and Victoria. (Appendix 2 presents a basic profile of the sample, this provides context to the process encounters entailed with each participant).

4.5.1. Process encounters

The research 'process encounters' traversed three organisations involved in helping to recruit potential participants. As I was to complete fieldwork in the UK first, I initially spent some time shadowing a local authority post-16 care leaver team in the Midlands with a view to understanding any potential barriers that may present in relation to recruitment. I also had opportunity to discuss the intended research process with team members and they offered opinions relating to the inclusion criteria, how much time would be considered appropriate to spend with the young people (with consideration of the juncture they may have reached in their lives), and where meetings could occur. The time spent with this team highlighted to me the importance of asking a team member to act as a gatekeeper to young people they knew and assessed as being in a position to meaningfully take part in the research. Additionally, it was particularly vital to enlist the support of gatekeepers in Australia, as I was an outside research without networks within the chosen locality.

Institutional gatekeepers were an integral part to the process encounters in facilitating recruitment and informed consent. The assistance of gatekeepers not only triggered access to young people from within their respective agencies, but it also further enhanced the ethical quality of the research. In the sense that, the presence of gatekeepers enabled the young adults to be involved in a monitored process of attaining their informed consent. In other words, the intended research had been judged to be of worth by an organisation to which they were, to varying degrees, affiliated. However, I would also like to note that it should be recognised that the sensory ethnographic nature of the project attempted to

ensure that the young people were not to be passive actors in the research. On review of the literature, ethnographically-minded research involving access to institutions that deliver an educational, care or leisure service of some kind to adolescents or young adults can provide scant evidence of consultation with those at the centre of the enquiry. Attention to care in attaining informed consent of young participants, and forging research relationships, can be outbalanced by a focus upon the research relationship with the gatekeeper. Especially as they are the facilitator to access and simply make the research happen (this concern is recognised across chapters within Best, 2007, Heath et al., 2009, and te Riele and Brooks, 2013). Access scenarios of this nature within the field of youth research have been observed as stimulating assumptive consent, which does not enable enough dialogue with young people to discuss their participation (Alderson, 2004; Heath et al., 2007). The degree of monitoring the gatekeepers afforded the process in my research, however, related more closely to 'rubberstamping' the value of the intended research, reaching out to potential participants to seek their involvement, and providing a failsafe mechanism if the participants had any concerns resulting from their involvement. It is my understanding that these considerations fostered the research relationship between me and the participants, than anything else.

Access and attaining the consent of the sample was negotiated at three levels. Firstly, the permission of institutional gatekeepers who held a managerial, operational role in the respective agency was sought. Secondly, other agency actors who had support roles in the targeted locales acted as intermediaries during the process of gaining initial informed

consent of potential participants. These support workers had access to a database of young people who had received, or were in receipt, of some kind of post-care service support and/or had experienced a foster care placement delivered through the agency during childhood. The final level involved my direct contact with the potential participants; this followed the granting of their permission to have their contact details forwarded to me, as they had expressed initial interest in participation. The gatekeepers could not as such legally arbitrate the young person's decision to participate as they were all over 18 and did not possess a 'vulnerable adult' status.

It is worth noting that I had originally considered recruiting participants through the University setting (as I was aware that there were care-experienced students on various programmes across the University due to my involvement with a widening participation initiative) and approaching various social work-related periodicals and forums to advertise the research. However, I surmised that involvement of institutional gatekeepers within an organisation - under the request to help with the recruitment of care-experienced young people who were able to comfortably participate in the sensory aspect – were relatively more likely to negate the potential of selection bias as they had access to significant number of young people with varying profiles and social locations.

As I have discussed, I am of the opinion that the use of gatekeepers were an enabling presence rather than a constraining one. On reflection, I guess, I had felt that gatekeepers were an option I must consider if the research was to progress. However, I did not have the

need to contest the presence of gatekeepers and the manner in which they facilitated consent processes. The constraints gatekeepers can place upon researching in overtly controlling which 'service users' should be recruited, and how the research is presented to potential participants, has previously been highlighted amongst various youth researchers (France, 2004; Heath et al., 2007). This predicament could be particularly constraining in research of a sensitive nature as researchers, gatekeepers and potential participants may hold different perspectives on the risk of emotional harm afforded research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Each gatekeeper I had dialogue with was open to hearing suggestions about how I would like to approach informed consent. The process was essentially a conversation between people with a concern for an area, rather than a restrictive process of negotiation. Of course, I must not deny the possibility that participants may have agreed to take part due to their affiliation with the agencies or their relationships with the intermediaries. The research relationship that drew out of these process encounters could not have, however, been perfectly engineered to avoid any sort of selection bias nor the degree of leverage the gatekeeper may have had with the participants in attaining their informed consent. Researching the private spaces of relationships and sense making had the potential to elicit profound emotional responses; this induced more concern within me about the situational encounters and the methodological channels through which voices could be heard.

After achieving ethical clearances through my home University and local authority, and identifying gatekeepers, restructuring at operational level in this local authority meant it became difficult to conduct the research in the timeframe I set. Moreover, my developing

knowledge of the youth transitions field highlighted how I did not want to focus solely on young people who were aged 18-21 and potentially engaged in post-16 services. Instead, I decided to seek a purposive sample of foster care experienced young people, aged 18-30, who were in the process of initial 'transitions' from care placements, were in supported lodgings arrangements post-16, or indeed were living 'independent' of service jurisdiction but remained on the case records of the gatekeepers. My intention was that this would allow for a breadth of reflections of transitional experiences that extended beyond 'school to work' youth transitional frames of 18-21 year olds, and generally opened up breadth in the exploration of individuality and relational experiences.

Subsequently, an independent foster care agency was identified (Agency 1) and a manager, keen to build a network of young people, who during childhood had foster care placements with the Agency, acted as gatekeeper. Similarly, University and organisational ethical clearances were achieved in Melbourne and gatekeepers chosen from two community foster care agencies who provide care placements and/or advocate for children, young people and 'care leavers' (Agency 2 and 3). Upon invitation of Agency 1, I was able to meet a selection of young people at a foster care symposium who were inputting in work with foster care children about issues relating to health and wellbeing. Here ten young people agreed to take part after I informed the group of the research. However, after various contact, three withdrew consent as they felt unable to spend time on the project due to moving home, starting a college course, and feeling upset discussing family as Christmas was approaching.

A further four young people were recruited directly through the gatekeeper and following discussions introducing myself and outlining my study.

Prior to my arrival in Victoria, various community organisations were identified that worked alongside young people who had experienced care placements in the regions, various events were visited to 'touch base' in person with practitioners and support workers. A 'drop-in' at an advocacy meeting amongst a small group of care leavers at Agency 2 led to the recruitment of two participants. A further three young people agreed but subsequently declined to take part as one young person was admitted to hospital, another decided he only wanted to take part if he could speak amongst peers. I received contact with a gatekeeper and the long-term foster carer of the third young person regarding concerns of a recent diagnosis of mental ill health and his current emotional state. This particular experience in the field outlined the importance of the gatekeeper in helping to facilitate informed consent and minimising risk of emotional distress to a participant. The meeting also provided the opportunity to leave 'research leaflets' containing an outline of the research and my contact details at the organisation to try to gain further recruits. Later, gatekeepers at Agencies 2 and 3 assessed their case records to ascertain which young people within their services had the necessary degree of intellectual and sensory capabilities to participate, the mental capacity to provide informed consent, and had conveyed they had scope to become involved.

During the process of attaining the necessary ethical clearances, it was clear that steps towards ensuring informed consent would be central in forging the research relationship throughout the process. Primarily, opportunity for informed consent was achieved via the participation information sheet (Appendix 1) and a telephone conversation with myself to further elucidate how they wished to proceed given the study's intentions, and to discuss locality and dates. The time involved in contact with gatekeepers, receiving an information sheet, and discussing the research with me, allowed for a period of reflection on their participation. I was initially concerned that young people would feel obliged to take part if they had a close relationship with their caseworker gatekeeper. However, I decided I needed to rely on the diplomacy and tact of the worker and my own intuition about whether a potential participant made sincere steps towards participation.

It was clear in one instance that a young person recruited through Agency 3, who had recently moved home and started university, had no scope to continue in the process after cancelling meetings twice and relaying lengthy reasons as to what was occurring in her life at the time. I had to suggest tactfully that we could not proceed this time and that she may be involved in other research in the future, as at that time, I felt I was extending the role of the caseworker in acting as a 'sounding board' and it was not ethical for me to continue. For this research, the use of gatekeeper in the process of access and acquiring informed consent was an important negotiation tool during 'process encounters' with ethical committees. To Murray (2005: 57), this area of research places gatekeepers as central to the process as a reflection of the 'pervasiveness of a protectionist model of children and young people over a

citizen-with-rights model'. Heath and Walker's 2012 edited collection of 'innovative research' with young people chimes with Murray's outlook, in explaining the proliferation of 'youth friendly' participatory methods, albeit they also place this in terms of wider centre-staging of rights-based legislation generally placing credence on youth 'voices'.

4.5.1.1. Research ethics standards

I have detailed the ethical considerations inherent to the process encounters, which provided the necessary platform from which to build the research relationships in the field. These ethical considerations included ensuring informed consent and the role of the gatekeeper as an important arbitrator to the minimisation of risk to participants in view of their inclusion. I will now outline the other essential ethical standards that were identified and have not been aforementioned. These considerations were also set out in the Universities of Birmingham and Melbourne ethical research panels, from which approval was gained.

Denscombe (2002: 174) recognised a gold standard for ethical research in stating that at the heart of any research a researcher must consider: 'Have the rights and interests of those affected by the research has been taken into consideration?' This standard stresses the primacy of just representation that is afforded any research with social groups whose lives may be deemed susceptible to vulnerability and problematisation, as care-experienced young people are. Equal consideration was given to the current social location of the participants, each was over the age of 18, legally adults, and no longer 'looked-after

children' as their care orders had expired. A high degree of participatory ownership of the research process was enabled, through the sensory ethnographic incorporation, enhancing the opportunity to offer counter representations. However, it is acknowledged that during the co-construction of the life stories the choice of material aimed to minimise emotional upset could have been evoked through the act of remembrance.

On occasion, it transpired that photographic elicitations or the telling of the story was stirring an emotional response, this overtly occurred during meetings with three participants. In this event, the participants diverted focus to other items or another aspect of their lived experiences, or I asked alternate questions to settle the participants. They relinquished control over the process of telling and the emotional stirring did not manifest into overt upset that ceased the interview. Although I was attuned to the ethic of care relating to requesting participants share their lived experiences, I realised that they were fully informed adults who did not need to be handled with kid gloves. However, in the context of ethical procedures across two social work-related contexts, and my critiques of research with an unabashed focus upon decision making capabilities of young people, I made a thorough evaluation of the benefits of the research relative to the possible risks of emotional upset.

The act of remuneration in research is met with some cynicism due to a concern that the process confronts the intrinsic value of participation. Dickert et al. (2002: 368), for example, argue that 'money may unduly induce subjects to participate in research by compromising

the voluntary nature of their decisions'. The notion that young people may be blindsided by remuneration in terms of evaluating the 'risks and benefits' to their participation is perhaps an exaggeration. The participants in this study were informed of their anticipated input, their involvement required time and emotional investment and was deserved of the reward of a gift voucher. I also ensured I covered the travel costs for the participants who had to travel; I therefore posted the train tickets/bus fares in these cases. In most cases, however, I travelled to meet them, and paid for refreshments. The sample participated meaningfully so there were no issues over remuneration. I ensured each received a 'thank you' card as a personal gesture, and to reinforce that contact is available should they have any questions or request a written anonymised report of the findings.

The scope for the young people to decide how and where they would like to tell their story was paramount in this research. I therefore allowed them to highlight where they would like to meet. On each occasion, I ensured that a gatekeeper and somebody at the University knew of my whereabouts. However, as the care orders of these young people had expired, safeguarding procedures were not applicable, as they would have been for looked-after children. The use of the gatekeepers to facilitate the inclusion and exclusion process through the young peoples' case notes within the organisations ensured that there were no adult safeguarding procedures required. The young peoples' right to confidentiality was also upheld, and I was not required to inform the gatekeepers of any behaviour that may put the participants and their relations at risk. I ensured that the life stories were anonymised as far as possible. However, the unique detail the care trajectories afforded would unfortunately

mean that, should organisations read this presentation in the thesis, they might recognise the young people they have represented on occasion. In this case, I have to rely on the professional integrity of the key workers, as it is not something I can arbitrate. Permission was granted to use the digital forms of the sensory material should it be required. I decided not to incorporate any photographic material due to the poignancy of these family displays and, of course, potential breaches of identity.

4.5.2. Situational encounters

Several 'situational encounters' presented whilst in the field that are worth reflecting upon in view of the nature of research relationship, which aimed to enable narrative dialogue. Despite notifying participants that I was a PhD student, and had no professional affiliation with the recruitment organisations, a few young people from the Melbourne sample asked if I worked for children and young people's services and sought assurance that information would not be conveyed to 'the Department'. One participant in particular was litigating against the State government department due to alleged negligence relating to a former placement and so asked how much could be divulged. Another highlighted her precarious situation in relation to local services and the Department's general handling of her case and made several 'make sure you tell them this' statements.

As a result, there was certain information across their narratives that I felt necessary to omit to protect identities and ensure the participants cases were not complicated in any way should my findings be read. In saying this, the encounters brought to light a tension in the

field when researching within this area. During the process of recruitment, I made sure to underline to organisations that my research findings were not to represent an evaluation of their services, but I was instead seeking to build knowledge on the experience of transition. Organisations were supportive of the research and willing to discuss their work and commit to the recruitment process. Even so, as a student researcher, I had to strike a balance between seeking to relate to the participants to broker trust, and being mindful of the actual reality of their lives in terms of any existing relationships with services.

Overall, on reflection, it is clear that my identity as a non-practitioner and student helped me build a rapport with the participants. In particular, amongst the younger members of the sample and those who were in education or considering undertaking a course. On occasion, my identity stimulated much conversation about future hopes and barriers to achieving in education. Some also remarked that they felt reflecting on their experience provides opportunity to present a counter-narrative to the claims they believe are embedded in the social work profession about care leavers as 'failed' and 'unsuccessful' young people requiring controlled and regimented support. Others suggested and remarked that discussing their experiences reflects their empathy towards children and young people who remain in care. In all, there was a variance in motivations for taking part in the research, as expressed at particular points in the life story or initially during recruitment.

I was aware that recruiting young people through organisations that are building networks of young people, who may have a general advocacy role, might mean the research was open

to capturing the 'professional care leaver' cohort who were used to providing information on their lives and discussing policy and practice issues. Of course, a situational encounter of this nature may have compromised the validity underpinning the construction of the life story via the narrative dialogue facet. Of the seven that had been involved in internal research or speaking amongst professionals and carers at care forums, none expressed that they had presented biographical material and constructed a life story in great depth. Instead, they had experienced discussing themes of their care and care leaving experiences. In saying this, each participant brought something unique to the table, because of the sensory material and location of meeting, breadth of care and life experiences, or simply the individuality in conveying their story and engagement in the research relationship. This was not entirely surprising, but proceeding through 'process ethics' and fairly extensive literature in the field on 'sensitive' research with 'vulnerable' care experienced children and young people (Ward and Henderson, 2003; McLeod, 2007; Bromfield and Osborn, 2007, amongst others) confronted somewhat my resolve to explore lived experiences of my chosen population. Overall, my research relationships in the field and drawing up key findings squared this circle for me. Alongside, appreciating that young peoples' perspectives need to be bought to the fore in research to support or counter weighty 'adult' and professional-centric inputs in policy and practice (for example, Vaughan, 2008; Morris et al., 2012).

4.5.2.2. Sensory ethnographic principles and situational encounters

As aforementioned, key to my approach to working with the participants was the incorporation of sensory material to the life story interviews as a way to ease the

construction of the life story. Sensory material had potential to evoke memories of experiences and anchor present sense making to give shape to the construction of the life stories. Unwittingly, I found that my research methods are currently in the methodological innovation camp, particularly as sensory ethnographic principles are somewhat gaining popularity across research exploring the interception of the multi-dimensional nature of social experience with expression of individuality (Pink, 2009) (research that is gaining some pace involving youth, see Heath and Walker, 2012). Debates are surfacing about the place of social research methodologies and associated methods recognised as distinct and, therefore, laying claims to innovation. On the one hand, it is recognised that methodological innovation can offer fresh research techniques that support active participation of a sample (rather than relatively more passive Q&A interview format) which helps to counter 'power' of the researcher over the researched (Conolly, 2008).

In contrast, Travers (2009: 175-6) argues that 'new methods' do not necessarily advance critical understanding of 'old problems' that underpin social science, and so calls for healthy degree of scepticism about 'institutional or commercial pressure to innovate '[…]at the expense of acknowledging the difficult debates' that are the cornerstone of interpretive reasoning. However, mindful of a duty to ease the process of recounting sensitive experiences as much as possible, the blending of 'innovative' methods with a traditional qualitative approach of narrative life stories fostered a reciprocal research relationship. This method did represent more than easing ethical 'process encounters', it brought depth to the 'situational encounters' in sensitising me to how people convey and make sense of their lives

through their artefacts of memories (to the benefit of how narrative accounts were structured by the participant and myself during analysis, to be discussed in Section 4.6).

Fundamentally, the participants were placing their artefacts of memories and present self-representations in the frame to evoke storied data across temporalities, inclusive of narratives imbued with their sense making of transitional experience. Hey (2000: 161) saliently observes that 'research is always at some level about seeking and in part claiming an understanding of the other'. These claims are, of course, framed through the researchers own interpretations, and are not unattached from their own ideological, social and material positionality. The research relationship facet also sought understanding, from which I hoped the claims made from analysis of the narrative dialogue were not embellished by my interpretations of storied data. In returning to the hermeneutic dialogical relationship between text and context, it is observed that narrative texts are derived in the context of 'the interviewee's subjective perception of his/her situation and history and the interviewee's perception of the researcher and the relationship between the two of them' (Miller, 2000: 131-2). How participants wished to recollect their experience, and represent self, however, generated a particular biographical narrative of their lived experiences whilst talking through the material.

This freedom of self-representation to minimise emotional harm in the field, however, meant I could not contain aspects of the past the young participants wanted to explore through sensory material. This has parallels with what Herrera (1999) observes, in that fully

informed consent does not eradicate risk, but allows participants element of control over participation and any perceived risks that may result from their participation. To do so, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest, would deviate from and constrict any emotional connections, which may stifle a chance of catharsis during the process. This was a similar observation made during an informal pilot scenario I conducted with eight first year social policy undergraduates. These students thought that I needed to relinquish most of my input in the process and not incorporate any visual elicitation tools that I was considering (for example, timelines, social network mapping techniques, diaries), so to provide both creative and emotional space for expression.

A couple of participants, Hayden and Imogen, did not refer to anything you could describe as sensory material. It was during a walk near his current town that I began to forge the research relationship with Hayden, whose narrations preceding this were slowly expressed and abrupt. Whilst walking after the 'formal' meeting in a public library, and answering questions about England, I was able to gain a sense of his desire to leave his current hometown and how overwhelmed, unsettled, and distant from his family he was feeling. A walking part of the interview with Callie also provided some additional reflections on the abrupt movement from her previous placement that linked to a set of anxieties about having no sense of a future in the locale. 29-year-old Imogen, on the other hand, was more assured and, following a conversation with Blake her adopted brother, she felt the need to talk about her experiences surrounding entry into and within care in a way she had not previously. She was able to reflect upon, trace and articulate the impact of her transitions and family life

with the necessary depth and breadth that someone can have with distance on her in-care experience.

Amongst those that drew upon sensory material, from my perspective, it was clear through the choices made which aspects of the past the participants wished to focus upon to frame their stories. Photographs representing aspects of childhood, family, foster or residential care, friendships, and pets were the most common biographical source to convey life into the present. Understandably, some of the young people expressed when discussing their material that various photographs or other artefacts of childhood were not accessible, this being due to transient family and placement moves or communication breakdown. Considering the nature of the research, it was likely that childhood family photographs would be a recurrent choice; however, I did not anticipate that documentation from care proceedings and visits from social workers would be brought and used as a metaphoric window to the past.

This choice of material provides a good example of the differing ways in which similar types of sensory material were drawn on to convey their representations of lived experiences. Blake used the records of his time in residential and foster care to highlight how it represented little about his identity and childhood, and more about 'procedural pap, just rubbish they would throw at me that meant little'. Venice discussed documentation from care proceedings, including photographs of physical harm her birth mother inflicted. She did so as a means to highlight a former identity in which she was cast as a victim, and to express

how far she had come in reconciling her feelings towards her mother and allowing herself distance on that aspect of the past. Hari discussed his documentation of care proceedings to highlight strength of character into the present. Hari highlighted gaps in the records and questions unanswered about aspects of his childhood. He conveyed how he requires 'these anchors' to help himself and his brother to find resolution to 'move forward and stop looking back'.

The unexpected use of documents of a sensitive nature exemplified 'situated encounters' in the field that can intensify the research relationship. Although often the material I was shown was heart-warming, and sometimes funny, the visual information was sometimes upsetting - in particular, Venice's photographs of her experience of severe physical abuse, and her claim that she entrusted me as she 'hadn't shown people outside of her family'. This situational encounter could have been more confronting had Venice not expressed the use of the material as a way of 'letting go' and 'showing you what it is like now, and then'. These unexpected situational encounters are difficult to foresee in research that seeks to understand the other through participants' own representations, and places a degree of trust and required emotional expectations of support onto the research relationship. Whilst talking about her family history, Leila, for example, openly asked 'what would you do if you were me?' in relation to seeking DNA results to establish for certain who her biological father is.

Denzin (1970) highlights that encounters that underpin the expectations of how a research relationship should function present as a situation and an associated set of rules. My situated encounters would largely reflect 'relational' rules highlighting standards and characteristics similar to the encounters between friends and kin. I surmise that this is due to how I was drawn into the world of lived experience through sensory material that meant something to them, and which evoked rich descriptions of *linked lives.* The 'rule' that I could represent a channel of advice and support was in my mind tricky to overcome, especially in Leila's case regarding her question seeking my advice. Ethically, it was best to reverse the question to 'what do you think you should do?' and 'what advice have you received from those you've told?'

I was mindful that our meetings represented fleeting moments in their lives, and it was unlikely that I would talk to them again. All participants were aware that they could debrief with me or a gatekeeper should they feel it necessary. I am aware that, as my research was not a longitudinal ethnographic piece, I could not 'maintain the consistency and context' of alternate research that builds trustful relations with young people over a period of time necessary for power relations to weaken (Blackman and Commane, 2012). However, I am mindful that life history work incorporating narrative dialogue may, at least and to a degree, have a longer term impact on overall sense making as:

> *Narrative is representative of a process, of a self in conversation with itself [representing] a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaos of perceptions and experiences of a life (Josselson, 1995: 33).*

It is accepted that the impact of this sense making has limits, as narratives present as an attempt to coherently construct experience and are open to constant alteration in an uncertain future (Josselson, 1995). It was somewhat more difficult to accept the limitations of the research relationship in the case of Shannon, who presented as a little antagonistic at first and fired various questions like 'what will doing this research change?' I took this as a fair point, especially considering the context of her significant accommodation and financial difficulties and strained relations with particular services over time. However, I feel these situational encounters are symbolic outcomes of engaging in narrative dialogue, and are a necessary aspect of the research relationship that demarcates the ritualistic ethical process from design-conscious approaches. The encounters are imbued with an understanding that narrative dialogue represents mediation between expressing lived experience in relation to the self, significant others, and the researcher. The next section will turn attention to this narrative dialogue facet.

4.6. The narrative dialogue facet

> *Everything just seems like one big blur, basically. But there are certain things, when I think back. You know, when I try thinking of an individual time or event, it was like yes, well that's happened; but when I think of how the years have gone, it's like all rolled into one…But now I'm looking through these pictures, even though they are not in order, it's just like they all mark something significant. There's a picture of my first Christmas away from home here – just mad.* (Leila)

This section introduces the narrative dialogue facet within the methodology; it focuses particularly on remembering past transitional experiences in the context of how the

participants connected their past, present and future talk within their narrative accounts. The section will offer exemplars of how sensory material helped surface memory and unravelled sense making of lived experience in the form of narratives. However, the section will firstly concisely discuss the place of memory in biographical storytelling and presenting subjective lived experience over trajectories. It will do so under the gaze of 'hermeneutical case reconstruction' (Rosenthal, 1993), which highlights the researcher's need to identify and reconstruct accounts in view of delineations between biographical life experiences (which give sequence to the accounts) and narrated life experiences imbued with their individual and relational subjectivities (surfacing the meaning of experience into the present). It will highlight how sensory ethnographic principles may narrow this delineation in helping participants connect their past, present and future talk.

4.6.1. Memory and biographical narratives

In the narrating of lived experience through stories, biographical memories act as representations of self and a reconstruction of particular lived experiences over time. The nature of storied data as representations of the self, by the self, has meant narrative research has come under some methodological scrutiny. In essence, the malleability of memory is scrutinised due to its function as a 'most authentic and most signifying act of identity creation' to given audiences (Smart, 2011: 18). Researching biographical memory gained attention within cultural studies, highlighting the dynamic of memory as a representation of subjective experience made sense of within the social dimension (Keightley, 2009). This view that the act of remembrance of personal resonances from the

past is embedded in relations with others has significance to the study of lived experience. It allows for the memories evoked and presented within biographical narrations to be considered for the 'capacity for transformation in the present and future' (Keightley, 2009: 178). Therefore, there is a representational nature to memory, as memories are recalibrated according to a potential wish of the individual to structure alternate narratives of the past, (and consequently of the relationships that help shape these memories) to make fresh connections into the present and future.

Biographical memory of the past is mediated by self-representations into the present, which projects onto the ideal or anticipated future self. These representations bring together the interrelationship between memory and imagination, they construct and present meanings attached to memories as the imagination attempts to make experience intelligible (Mitztal, 2003). Alex's diagram of his past, present and future representations (see Illustration 2) offers an exemplar of an imaginative grasp on his biographical narrative connections. In referring to this digital representation, his narrations spanned his past and future self through his present reflections of his experiences. Alex was therefore able to frame a cohesive life story, and through the pictures on the diagram, was able to embed his experiences and sense of self over time into his present narrations. As he describes:

> *I thought that's the best way to do it because if you've got two circles and you've got the bit in the middle it represents the joining of the past and future, and that's what life is all about – it's all about what you have done in the past, how you are going to do what you want in the future by*

changing your present. Because if you've done what you've always done, you get what you've got.

Illustration 2: Alex's diagrammatic sensory material

His philosophical outlook underpins Alex's expressed control over his immediate life course, and how he makes sense of what has happened in his life through spiritual means. As he states, 'the Ying-Yang picture in the middle represents equality in my life, that's what's

happening at the moment'. He represents the past through the metaphor of 'conflict', whilst his present is mediated by 'equality' bringing into the future inspiration for strength and change. However, discussion of the individual pictorial representations of experience inspired other in-depth narrations about more traumatic transitions. Once he had structured his story around his pictorial representations, he was able to keep returning to various representations at certain points in the life story and narrate other linked memories they stimulated.

Similarly, Joe's use of sensory material provided biographical structure to his past to present connections. The material enabled expansive narratives of experiences and how they were made sense of into the present. Joe referred to photographs from childhood, care, youth offending institutes, and during phases of treatment for drug addiction, which provided structure to his biographical account. However, his discussion of his passion for music and poetry provided some depth of wisdom when he was tracing his transitional experiences and how he has transcended them. The following extract from a penned poem, which he rapped, offers an example of various narrative episodes providing insights into his sense making regarding his addiction.

> *I want to nail my demons and smoke through this coffin, six feet down underground without a sound.*
>
> *I'm a nervous wreck, I've no self-respect. Precious drugs in my veins, never stay the same, no shame and no fame.*

I need direction, every day I pray for protection. God please release these demons in me, trying to break free. I cannot eat, I don't sleep.

Sweating in position the pipe, to smoke all night. Paranoid all day, no time to play. I love what I hate, is this my fate or am I too late?

I'm a living contradiction stuck in addiction.

This poem also inspired fresh narrative episodes making connections from his past transitional flux to his present sense making regarding family life, troubled experiences in care and with key workers, and other relationships. Both Alex's and Joe's use of sensory material thus highlight how the practice can aid the reconstruction of the life story, and how sensory representations of self can act as anchors to various narratives offering an understanding of the meanings derived from lived experience of transition.

4.6.2. The relational quality to remembering experiences

To extend the above considered of the narrative representation aspect of memory, I will now turn to the power of family relations to evoke past remembrance. Smart (2011), for instance, considered the primacy the family has in acts of remembrance. She highlights how good or bad recollections are subject to embellishment, due to the nostalgic qualities that bind us to our earliest memories formed in respect to family life. The place of the biography in surfacing memories of family life acts a double bind; whether positive or negative, families are significant to the calibration of the past and so childhood remembrance of family 'create a new sense that these are special memories' and families are 'special places' (Smart,

2011:18). Somewhat unsurprisingly, all of the sample's life stories contained rather extensive narratives of notions of family life and self-reference about whom is family.

For most of the participants, narratives of 'family' were stimulated by reference to family photographs encompassing the past and present, and the future in terms of where kinship ties lie or need to be reformed. Gomila (2011: 63) describes family photographs as 'visual rhetoric'; visuals that offer an emotive reaction that elicit rhetoric on the meaning embedded within and attributed to them. The photographs drawn upon acted as stimuli for varying narrations on family displays and ideal forms, with reference to both the biological family and foster family. Thus, photographs go beyond memories of people, time and place as they are also reminders of belonging - of the internal dimension of family, reminding people of their place in the family group and their ascribed family identity (Gomila, 2011).

Several young people understandably referred to their family photographs with the nostalgic eye to which Smart (2011) refers. Associated narrations highlighted various photographs represented a time when family life was settled and a sense of belonging to a family unit entrenched (despite the nature of that family life) before various transitions into and between care. A common narrative across the biographies were those ascribing renewed feelings of closeness to family members in the photographs; of reaching, and emphasising, an understanding of their birth parents 'despite their problems'. As Gomila (2011) observes, family photographs project the moral, sentimental, and cultural ideal of family togetherness. Moreover, Smart (2011: 24) draws attention towards the powerful,

embedded symbolism family and kin holds, even if these practices embody 'love and closeness or hate and bitterness', they operate on an affective level and concern our practices and imaginary thoughtful conversations.

The participants' uses of photographs in this study were direct reflections of this emblematic symbolism. In the main, family photographs highlighted the rituals associated with bringing family together, such as Christmas and birthdays, both before care, during, and symbolising relationships with birth families being rebuilt. Reference to these photographs generally stimulated narrations laden with poignancy, and mixed senses of happiness and loss. Other photographs of family homes, siblings and pets provided a sense of security, of belonging, and understanding their 'permanent place'. In particular, photographs of places of birth were emphasised in terms of feelings of 'who I am', of being, for example, a 'Londoner' or 'Northerner'. A cultural ideal about family 'practice' was particularly evident in Venice's narrative reflections on her family photographs of extended kin in Africa, her place of birth. Despite abrupt separation from her African family, and the associations with some traumatic memories regarding this separation, Venice drew extensive links between her past family photographs, and those of her long-term foster care family. She narrated about notions of extended kin in the African context, and drew parallels to her foster family extended family and how important this sense of integration with many different relatives is to her.

Misztal (2003: 81) emphasises the power of the social act of remembering in how traumatic memories are surfaced during narrations of the past as a mechanism for 'translating an

experience into language…to organise and assimilate the event in people's minds'. Trauma can alter, therefore, the nature of remembering, with memories experienced as vivid, persistent and invasive. As such, memories may be less about collective remembrances of a family over time and more about experiencing the memories of these events 'within the compass of our own activities' (Mitztal, 2003: 76). A number of the participants had experienced multiple movements between care homes or mentioned traumatic episodes. Each noted there were aspects of their pasts they find difficult to remember through which they could draw some sense. In these instances, participants mentioned that there were recognisable gaps in their care records through which their memories could be evoked. Alternatively, participants mentioned that they had experienced such a variety of different placements over their childhood that their abilities to retrospectively make connections with certain periods of their life were inhibited.

It was often the case that the participants' choice of material paralleled a narrated desire to disassociate themselves with former family members and display agency about whom is family. Imogen, Emma and Jessica expressed trouble at remembering aspects of the past that were relevant to their childhood experiences and care trajectories, however, they provided strong narratives reminiscent of sense making into the present. For instance, Imogen spoke at a great length about her experiences in view of being a mother herself and the meaningful relationship she built with her long-term foster carer. Emma focussed most directly on life after care , she made interesting links between her overall care trajectory and her initial years upon moving from care, channelling reflective links into the present in how

returning to her home town provided her the anchor she needed. She drew on the visual metaphor of a London Underground Map in situating her experience of leaving care and the impact of her transitional experiences into the present:

> *I came out of care, all confused and twisted, with all these routes and options open to me. I didn't know where my priorities lied, with my old foster carers, or my brother, or my birth family. It was all about choice, whereas all my life I didn't have one…So, I floated around, and then decided London is where I should be, with my family.* (Emma)

Jessica, a part-time social work student, found inspiration through the written experiences of others, she discussed other care children and the 'negativities' pinned to care experienced children and young people at length. Jessica directly drew upon an extract of a journal article (see Illustration 3) within which another care-experienced woman explored a sense of past disassociation from her peers and family life: This extract inspired narratives and metaphors rooted in Jessica's past family life and her present independence gained from transcending the 'deleterious' care leaver label and understanding 'functioning' families.

Illustration 3: Example of Jessica's sensory elicitation material

I had little motivation to live and even less motivation to succeed. If all a teacher gives a child is a crayon, then he can't expect that child to produce a Picasso. You do what you can with what you are given. I didn't feel that the Children's Aid Society expected much if anything from me: All I was given was a crayon. The bare minimum required to draw out a life for myself. I suppose I was one of the lucky ones for some are expected to draw their own blood in order to have a medium to paint with. Growing up witnessing your friend's lives awash with colour as they paint with their thick acrylic paint and skilled hands, you begin to wonder how you got stuck colouring in a faded image in an old colouring book. Being a youth in care, you don't learn creativity and skill rather you learn how to stay between the lines. My life was not to be a work of art but rather a torn page from a colouring book to be discarded like the rest. I knew from the start that my life would never make it on the government's refrigerator door, no matter how well I stayed between the lines. Youth in care, like mainstream youth have the desire to succeed, they have the imagination, the drive, the dream but I don't suppose it matters how much potential you have, if you are never provided with paint and the lessons required to bring the paint brush to life then you have nothing but a crayon, a colouring book and a wobbly hand. I would challenge anyone to paint a Picasso with those tools.

Extract from: Downton, J. and Lemay, R., 1999: 34-35.

4.7. Chapter summary

This chapter has detailed the facet methodological orientation of this research that sought to derive the inter-connective nature of transition experience, and past reflections of these. The chapter has detailed the research relationship and narrative dialogue facets. These

facets were carefully developed to ease the participants' research encounters and enhance the ability to induce narratives indicative of meaning making from transitional experience. Ethnographic principles were at the heart of these facets, and the substantive literature relating to memory sensitised the researcher to the complexities entailed in biographical representations of family-related experience. The chapter offered exemplars of the participants' sensory representations that helped connect their past, present and future narrated talk. The following chapter will focus upon the care trajectory and relatedness facets. It will discuss how the variance in care experiences, family displays and notions of relatedness, evoked through narratives of transitional experience, blended into the analytical approach of the data derived from the construction of the transition biographies.

CHAPTER FIVE - ANALYTICAL FACETS

5.1. Introduction: Analysing transitional experience

The previous chapter highlighted how a facet methodology orientation to exploring transition opens up possibility for understanding how a transition biography plays out in the relational realm of experience. The biography is a window to representing or relating to key experiences of interest. The presentation of a biography is said to 'iron out' the lived discontinuities, as oft are experienced in the form of happening in a linear reality. Pais (2003) uses the analogy of a comic strip, where key facets of the messages and metaphors wishing to be recalled are not through overt description, but in allowing for interpretative space through particularly placed narrated symbols. He elaborates:

> *In a comic strip – as in a life history – communication is through a discontinuous set of images (in the strip) or discourses (accounts). The images are static and separate. It is up to the reader to understand them as a coherent whole…What matters in the interpretation is deciphering how apparently contradictory realities overlap…through 'interconnectivity' (Pais, 2003: 121).*

Notions of an autonomous young person either discursively represented through institutions or self-ascribed are an interconnected theme across the youth transition literature, with various contradictions surfacing. An analytical approach was needed that helped form coherent conclusions exploring the interconnected themes between image (narrative expressions of lived experience of transition to draw meaning) and accounts (the young

peoples' own representations, in particular of notions of independence). The facets that I presented in Chapter Four to enable exploration of the transition biography were of significance to how I approached the analysis of the life story data. In particular, the sensory ethnographic principle to encouraging narrative dialogue sensitised me to the intricacies of narrative memory of family displays and how transitional experience was represented through notions of relatedness. The analytical lens needed to consider how the relational realm envelopes transitional experience, and so draws out interconnectivity of emblems of family life, institutional relations, and biographical experiences of the young people that hold significance. This chapter will proceed to describe how I approached analysis of the life story data, and how the remaining facets contributed to the transition biography of the participants.

5.2. The care trajectory facet

> *Most of my friends are care leavers, or have had a care history…It's quite funny that I always seem to attract the care side of friendship, even though you don't consider other people are in care or were in care…I think it's the understanding that is there. That they understand that they there are no mum, dad, brothers, sister – but, I have got 10 'ressie' brothers and 10 'ressie' sisters, or 2 foster brothers and a foster mum and dad. They understand my family circle.* (Bronwyn)

This section introduces the participants, it provides biographical synopses derived from their storied data and, in doing so, overviews the transitional experiences they emphasised as significant through their narrations. This initial analytical layer helpfully uncovered the multitude of transitional experiences upon the participants' care journeys, but also drew out how other trajectories are interwoven widening the scope of transitional experiences. To

find my way through the scale of life story data from 20 participants, I began to attempt to find structural themes from within a single story using NVivo qualitative analysis software so to attempt to frame the analysis for the remaining stories. I was attuned early on to how this was a rather heavy-handed approach to narrative analysis, which would not draw out the unique quality of each story that unravelled sense making, representations of self, and notions of relatedness.

I was cautious not to slice the storied data and present experience in terms of a chronological account due to the twist and turns in experience that characterise transition and relatedness. Moreover, the incorporation of sensory ethnographic principles meant there were natural stops and starts in the telling of the life story as the young people begun to configure and reconfigure their narrative accounts across their connections with the past, present and future. This form of narrative telling gave definition to the research relationship and narrative dialogue facet, the power of which I did not want to lose. I therefore decided to unpack key moments that were defined as transitional in the sense they were simply expressed within narratives as anticipated or experienced change in circumstance. This idea helped attune me to the unique constructions of the story and variance in care experiences. Therefore, whilst tracing the care trajectory of the participants provided written structure to the synopses, I was also able to draw out the transitions conveyed as significant across various trajectories. For presentational purposes, 5.2.1 presents the biographical synopses of the England sample, whilst 5.2.2 concerns the Melbourne sample.

5.2.1. Biographical synopses of participants in England

Alex *was born in the South West in 1992. During the intervening years between his date of birth and entering care, Alex lived with his birth mother and half-sister. His first care placement came in 2003, age 11; a care order was granted because of the discovery of physical and emotional abuse inflicted by this mother. Alex's half-sister was also placed into care, but within different foster families. Alex's first placement was a short-term foster care arrangement delivered through the local authority; his second was a long-term foster care arrangement via a private foster care agency (Agency 1). Alex expressed that joining a local Karate club at age 15 was an influential transition; a black belt was gained three and half years later. At Christmastime, age 16, Alex and his foster family were informed that it was probable that he would need to leave his foster care placement due to funding restrictions. Alex was preparing for his GCSE secondary school qualifications at this time. Alex's care order ceased when he reached 18, however, he remained in the home of his foster carers on a supported lodgings basis. At age 19, at the time of meeting, Alex remained in the South West of England with the couple who had become his long-term foster carers. Other influential transitions occurred whilst gaining various educational qualifications (from secondary level through to sixth form and finally a higher education programme at college); in particular, qualifications aligned to Business to help shape his future desire to run his own martial arts school and become an accountant. Alex continues to study a foundation degree at a local College and was aiming complete an Honours degree before pursuing a post-graduate Accountancy programme. Completing his education at university is possible as Alex is able to stay with his former foster parents ('ma' and 'pa') and commute from home into the near future.*

Callie *was born in the North West in 1991. Her biological mother left the family home when she was aged 3, and Callie then moved into her biological father's home. She lived in the same part of England in which she was born alongside her father and step-mother until she turned 13. At age 13, Callie moves to the North East of England with her father and joined the RAF cadets due to her father also being in the RAF and wanting to share a commonality with him. Tension later surfaced between Callie and her stepmother and her stepsister, meaning relations are now strained. Callie attributes her stepmother's attitude towards her as central to the detrimental decline in her relationship between herself and her father, which resulted in channels of communication ending. Callie last saw her father on her 15th birthday. Callie first entered care when she was 14; this was an emergency foster care placement in the North East of England. Latterly, Callie entered a foster care arrangement delivered through Agency 1 that became a long-term setting up until she reached the age of 16. Callie moved from her foster care placement into a local authority*

supported lodgings setting due to her being in full-time education. At the time of the meeting, aged 18, Callie remains in the supported lodgings placement and she has developed a close relationship with her 'foster sister' who is the same age as one of her own sisters (her birth mother's daughter). A relationship is slowly being re-established with her birth mother, who she met at age 16 for the first time since entering care. Callie has also had contact for the first time with her three younger siblings, and is continuing to meet-up with them as far as possible. Callie alludes to tension between the mother figure in the supported lodgings setting and herself. In the future, Callie has her hopes set on leaving 'home' and gaining a lease on a private apartment with her friend. Now, she is finishing her BTEC qualification in Computing before she is able to move from her current home.

Charlotte *was born in 1982 in the South East. The second eldest of four, she lived with her birth mother until the age of 7. Contact with her biological father ceased around the age of 3. Charlotte's entry into care was precipitated by her mother's declining mental health following major surgery relating to cancer. Charlotte entered foster care at age 7, along with her siblings. When Charlotte moved into a second, more permanent, placement she was placed with her younger brother. Her older brother and younger sister were placed in a separate foster home to Charlotte. Between the ages of 9 and 13, Charlotte's care transitions became more variable and transient. At age 9, she was placed for adoption along with her younger sister. Any contact with other siblings ceased during this period following social workers' assessment this would be for the best due to Charlotte's emotional difficulties. At age 10, Charlotte was legally adopted along with her younger sister. Following difficulties in settling down and separation anxieties, the adoption broke down for Charlotte and she was placed back into care, whilst her sister remained with the adopted parents. During this time, other foster parents adopted Charlotte's younger brother and her older brother remained in a separate home with foster carers. Charlotte remained in care for 8 months, during this timeframe her former adopted mother urged authorities for her to be placed with her younger sister once again. At age 12, Charlotte lived with adopted parents for a further 5 months before re-entering care again. Now back in the care system, she had two foster care placements from which she frequently absconded. Whilst in another foster care placement that lasted 8 months, Charlotte experienced a serious assault, initiated by her foster sister. Charlotte settled into a long-term placement that lasted between the ages of 13 and 17. During this period, her foster carers transferred to Agency 1. Charlotte's contact with her birth mother ceased between the ages of 8 and 15. The contact between herself and her mother re-established through a series of letter exchanges when Charlotte reached 15, some of these letters were experienced as emotionally abusive. Charlotte maintained regular schooling patterns and left once she reached 16 having finished her GCSEs. Once her funding for her long-term foster placement ended, Charlotte moved into a YMCA foyer at age 17. This accommodation consisted of supported housing for young people at risk of homelessness.*

During this time Charlotte re-established contact with her biological father and begun a two-year college course (the programme was not completed due to financial concerns). Charlotte's adolescence and successive years were marred through various suicide attempts and episodes of self-harming, these events ceased by the time she reached 19. Between the ages of 22 and 23 Charlotte decided to follow-up her wish to become a foster or adoptive parent, however, she was deterred from applying by an inability to reconcile her care history, and its affects, and conversations with social services regarding her potential application. At age 25 Charlotte became a mother and is presently building a life with her daughter as a lone parent following the break-up of the relationship with her fiancé soon after the birth of their child. Charlotte's relationship became increasingly strained with her birth mother, and she felt unable to forge healthy communication with her. As such, she made the decision to cease any kind of contact with her mother. Charlotte is keen continue to draw on her experiences of care and build a future for herself as an employed member of Agency 1, and to adopt or foster children. An immediate concern of Charlotte is to find employment that is stable enough for her to finish claiming out-of-work benefits. She also would like to follow her dream of getting married and having another child.

Emma *was born in London in 1988 and placed in care at age 3 alongside her 1 year old brother. For a period of approximately two years, Emma was placed in children's homes and spent time transitioning from care into the home of her biological mother or father before being taken back into care. Emma's long care trajectory includes 50 foster care placements up until she left the care system, whilst her brother had 4. At age 13, whilst Emma was in a temporary foster care placement, her birth mother passed away. Emma received the news of her mother's life threatening deterioration of health too late for her to be with her mother during her final moments. During this time, Emma become separated in the care system from her brother, and then continued to spend time within foster care placements delivered by both the local authority and Agency 1. At one point, Emma was placed alongside her brother when she was 13, then separated again for the second time. Whilst in a placement with her brother, she experienced physical assaults at the hands of her foster carers in attempting to defend him. The foster carers increasingly struggled to help her cope emotionally with the death of her mother. Emma had one long-term placement of 3 years, from the age of 13, sometime following the death of her mother. She left this placement when she became pregnant with her daughter. Emma had a spell of drinking and drug misuse up until she became pregnant, these events occurred at a time she left full-time schooling at the age of 14. At 16, Emma gives birth and also separates from her boyfriend and daughter's father. Now having left care, she is accommodated as part of a local authority post-care package that was negotiated through after-care services and Agency 1. Emma remained in this accommodation for 4 months before being evicted as she was unable to cope with maintaining a home life, this scenario was repeated several*

times. When she reached 18, further accommodation was negotiated through the local authority post-care team near her biological father in London. Once Emma reached 21 she remained in London with her daughter and became her father's carer following his stroke. At the time of the meeting, At 22, Emma had started an entry degree with the Open University in Health and Social Care with view to later extending this degree to include Childhood and Youth Studies. She remains in contact with her brother and sees him frequently. She hopes to find full-time employment working within the care system, and also hopes to become a foster carer herself.

***Eva**'s early years were spent under the radar of social services due to her mother's routine drug use, which resulted in spending time in mother and baby units. Born in 1992 within the Midlands, Eva initially lived with her birth mother and older sister, but also spent time in the home of her biological father. Once she had reached the age of 5, Eva was placed in residential care alongside her sister. The sisters made various transitions between care homes for the next 5 years. At some point during the residential placements the sisters were both sexually abused by an older child within the home. At age 10, Eva was separated from her sister and they both went into foster care placements, although they remained in contact. Eva's foster placement was arranged and delivered through Agency 1. Her first foster care placement lasted a month, and her other placement lasted upon until the age of 16. During this time, at the age of 14, Eva spent time in a youth offenders institute and later received therapy. Moreover, she had periods of supervised contact with her mother and experimented with drugs. Due to erratic attendance, she left school without any qualifications. Once she left the care system at age 16, she went to live in a hostel. Her post-care team eventually found permanent accommodation via a post-care scheme and lived in a house that she eventually shared with a partner. She lived with this partner for 2 and a half years and experienced physical assaults precipitating the end of the relationship. Between the ages of 18 and 19, Eva moved into local authority accommodation on her own, a key worker from Agency 1 helped her decorate this current home. She had recently come into contact with her biological father and has a relationship with her half-siblings. She has also completed a level 1 course in Mental Health Awareness, and had wanted to continue but the programme was halted. Presently involved in advocacy for children in care, she wants to continue to work in this area in the future. Eva hopes to eventually find employment as a family liaison officer or support worker. She also hopes to continue to attend college courses, this time in sign language and mentoring.*

***Joe**, and his twin brother, was born in 1987 in the South East. Between the ages of 2 and 3, his parents separate and he lives with his mother, twin brother, and older sister. At age 9, as a result of circumstances surrounding his mother's alcohol and drug use, Joe enters care, though without his siblings. His first care placement was a children's home, this lasted for a*

period of 3-4 months. During this time, an older resident of the home first introduced him to drugs. Upon moving from the care home between the age of 9 and 10, he entered his first foster care placement. Joe had a total of 30 foster placements up until he left care. Joe's longest foster care placement lasted a year, this was delivered via Agency 1, and other placements lasted for short periods. During his time in care, Joe was also placed in a few other residential homes. Joe's attendance at school was very limited due to multiple moves between care placements, resulting in an inability to settle and suspension or exclusion. Joe received home tutoring at certain points during this period. By the time Joe reached 12, he had 15 criminal offences, accumulating in time spent in youth offending institutes between the ages of 14 and 15. Joe left care at age 17, his transience continued. During this year, he spent time on a work placement and lived in supported housing accommodation (a shared house for young people that could not live with their families), from which he was told to exit. He also lived with his father's sister and her partner for a couple of months before moving into a YMCA youth hostel, and was again told to exit this. He also spent time in youth offending institutions, before leaving and spending a short period of time living with his birth mother. Towards his 18th birthday, he undertook a college course in construction, but found himself unable to complete this. Between the ages of 18 and 20, Joe's drug use escalated and he became addicted to heroin. During this time, he was sent to various prisons on charges relating to theft, violence and drug possession. Joe underwent rehabilitation programmes at certain points in time whilst in prison. After serving his final prison sentence, Joe resided in a secondary treatment centre for drug addicts. He completed this programme and joined a gym - health and fitness remains an important part of Joe's life. Now living back in the South East, he begun to use drugs again, and dealt with addictive behaviour patterns and periods of homelessness. At the age of 21, Joe ceased drinking alcohol and taking drugs; he presently attends Narcotics Anonymous to help stave off his addiction. Joe currently resides in the South West and has stable employment in the construction industry. He is also heavily involved in event organisation within the UK dance scene. Now aged 23, Joe is building a relationship with his twin brother and sister. Joe plans to travel to South East Asia and work within the dance scene there, most likely as a DJ. He aspires to find permanent employment within the care or youth justice system.

Leila *was born in the North West in 1990; she is the second eldest of a family of four, with one older sister and two younger brothers. At the age of 2, her mother leaves the family home. Up until entering care at age 14, Leila spends a significant amount of time looking after her younger siblings. Leila had infrequent contact with her birth mother, although she spent some weekends with her. Leila recalls experiencing episodes of physical abuse at the hands of her mother's partner. Upon entering care, a care order was granted for her up until the age of 18. Leila had two foster care placements, one of which was a delivered through the local authority and the second, via Agency 1, became her long-term placement. Leila remained with her long-term foster carers beyond the cessation of her care order,*

until she left home at age 20. Leila's siblings were placed in different foster homes. Leila completed her education and left school after completing her GCSEs. During her sixth form studies, she mentored younger schoolchildren. At age 18, Leila becomes involved in care advocacy in speaking at a carers' support group with Agency 1 and to a minister regarding the education of looked-after children. Leila also started working full-time in retail. At the time of the meeting, Leila was 20 and pregnant with her first child, a girl. Although, separated from her baby's father, they remain friends. Leila presently has her own tenancy for a privately- rented flat and has a female housemate around her own age. Her immediate future focus is on being a mother and returning to full-time work when her maternity leave ends.

Tori *was born in the South East in 1987 and spends her early years with her parents. Her parents soon separated because of conflict in the home surrounding incidences of physical abuse Tori experiences at the hands of her mother. Her biological father leaves the home following this separation. Tori entered care at age 2 and was placed in two short-term foster care homes. During one of these placements, incidences of abuse occur and a court case ensued as a result. Tori remained in contact with her paternal grandmother during this time and subsequent years. At age 3, Tori is placed with long-term foster carers through a private foster care agency for a period of 10 years. Tori began experimenting with alcohol and drugs at the age of 12 and became prone to aggressive outbursts that her carers found difficult to manage. At the age of 13, her long-term foster carers transferred to Agency 1. During this time, Tori received contact with her biological father and his family, despite recommendations that this should not occur until she reached 18. Between the ages of 13 and 15, Tori was transferred to two different foster care placements, with single foster carers, and under the care of a different foster care agency. These placements soon broke down; however, she remains in contact with these foster carers. During this time Tori was placed with another single foster carer through Agency 1, this placement also broke down after a short period of time. At some time preceding her 16th birthday, Tori moved to an emergency foster care placement again delivered through Agency 1, she remained there until her care order ended at 18. Upon leaving care, Tori gains access to her care record and later receives payment from the local authority regarding abuse experienced from her step-mother and foster parents. Tori also moved to semi-independent accommodation, later having a succession of 3 housemates who had also left care. These housemates were routinely abusive or stole from her. Between the ages of 18 and 21, Tori started a course at a local College and found work in a nightclub. At age 21, Tori moves to the South West and commutes to the South East for college, and also finds part-time work as a cleaner. During this time she lived in a privately rented accommodation with housemates. At the age of 22 upon meeting, Tori had completed her HND in Tourism Management and, in linking to this interest, had previously visited Africa as a volunteer in a school for three months. Tori also currently advises on looked-after children panels*

regarding the appointment and retention of foster carers. Tori has a significant interest in travel and tourism and would like to eventually gain employment within World Heritage sites or relating to the management of these. She would also like to be involved in associated documentaries. Tori plans to continue to work with children in foster care as an advisor to foster care organisations.

***Venice** was born in Africa in 1991 to an unwed 16-year-old, and so was removed from her mother to be cared for within the homes of her father's brother and paternal grandmother. In time, her birth mother moved to Germany, later returned to Africa, and took Venice away on the premise of going for lunch. The family spent up to a year in another country before arriving in London when Venice was 6. Upon arriving in the UK, Venice lived with her birth mother and her older sister and brother. Her sister was placed in care 6 months after the family's arrival in the UK; Venice continued to receive physical abuse and neglect from her mother. After Venice had reached the age of 10, her sister informed social services of the situation at her mother's home. Venice continued to experience sustained violent attacks from her mother and severe neglect. These events accumulated in a hospitalisation and repeated medical care, which was required over a period of a year. A care order was issued during Venice's medical treatment and she spent time in a foster care placement managed by Agency 1 with a single foster carer, this placement later broke down. During this time, Venice kept in contact with her sister and brother on a monthly basis, although they were never in care together. Various services intervened regarding the abusive episodes Venice experienced, during which time she spent a week in a mental health institute as a result. By the time Venice reached the age of 11, she was placed in another foster care home in London where she remained for 8 years. Throughout her time in her mother's home and care, Venice managed to continue with primary and secondary schooling and excelled at athletics, during this time she had a wide and supportive friendship base. Between the ages of 14 and 15, her potential career in athletics ends through serious injury. Venice successfully completed her GCSEs and sixth form studies where she honed her talent in art and photography. When she reached 18, Venice visited her childhood village in Africa. Travelling on her own, she meets her grandmother and other members of her maternal and paternal extended family. During this time, she contracts Malaria and received hospital treatment back in the UK. At age 19, Venice moved from her foster carer's home to a privately rented flat nearby alongside with her foster sister from this placement. She works full-time to support herself. At the time of the meeting, she was on the process of drafting applications for university in order to study a course with a potential child welfare focus, such as child psychology or social work. She hopes to travel more, and eventually have children and adopt one child.*

Zafa*r was born in a rural village in Afghanistan in 1992. Up until the age of 14, Zafar works as a farmer on his parent's land and could not attend school. Zafar decided he would like to be educated and live in another country, he expressed this to his parents and this resulted in conflict within the home. Zafar eventually travels to his aunt's home in Pakistan with view to living in another country. He travelled with others in the only car within the village. After reaching his aunt's home he decided that he would like to be sent to England and discussions surfaced about the help of illegal immigration agents to facilitate this. Zafar travelled for a period of three and a half months from his aunt's home before arriving in England via the Euro Tunnel alongside another asylum seeking teenager. Zafar journeyed through parts of Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Italy and France, before eventually arriving in England. Zafar and his friend were found in the Midlands by Police, and then taken to a Home Office building for questioning. From here, he was escorted to a young person's hostel for just one and a half months, as this was suited to young people over 16. He also enrolled at a local college to learn English. Zafar continued to have telephone contact with his aunt. Zafar was placed in a foster family alongside his friend, who later left after three days. Zafar mentioned to a social worker how much he missed his friend and, as such, was taken back to the hostel to stay with him. Another placement was found in a residential home, although he protested and spent two days here before trying to escape to a 'major city', being picked up by Police along the way. Following this, around the age of 15, Zafar begun full-time school but did not return after a year. Zafar also moved to a foster care placement with an Iranian speaker, with whom he stayed for just a couple of months as he requested that he moved to an English speaking home in order to progress. He later entered a foster home delivered through Agency 1, and remained here until the age of 18. He also enrolled at another school in the Midlands. At 16, Zafar enrolled at a local college and found part-time employment. He also became a youth volunteer working on environmental projects, and volunteered for the Refugee Council as an advocate regarding the process of immigration. He also became involved in the Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project in Birmingham. Once he reached 18, Zafar moved to accommodation in a supported-accommodation setting delivered through the local authority alongside other care leavers. He will need to exit this arrangement a year earlier than usual due to a discrepancy with his date of birth as recorded onto documents issued by the Home Office upon arrival to the UK. At the time of the meeting, Zafar remained unsure regarding how his accommodation situation will transpire as he is currently undergoing legal advice. He was hopeful that he receives a change in status allowing him to remain in the UK. He aspires to find a trade that will allow him to build and fix things, such as a becoming a mechanic, plumber, etcetera. He has promised to repay his aunt in future for funding the immigration journeys he undertook, and this remained a burning desire.*

5.2.2. Biographical synopses of participants in Melbourne

***Blake**, born in Victoria in 1989, spent his early childhood up until the age of 6 living with either his biological father or mother who had separated soon after this birth. Blake was placed into care because of his mother's drug use and his father's mental health problems. Blake's home life was experienced as unstable as a result, and additionally, his relationship with his father's partner was emotionally abusive. Blake's first experience of care was in a residential unit with a few key workers, he described this placement as relatively stable and stayed here for up to two years from the age of 6 or 7. From here, Blake stayed with a couple whom he believed adopted him for a period of six months. According to Blake, his challenging behaviour and their inability to mediate for this meant the placement broke down. At age 9, Blake spent some time with each of his biological parents, but this was short-lived. He remained in contact with them throughout his time in care, though he spent more time with this biological father than his mother. Between the ages of 9 and 14, Blake was placed within residential homes in a total of three placements, inclusive of the home in which he entered when first transitioning into care. Blake alluded to this time as being unsettling, primarily because of the turnover of workers. Blake eventually moved into a long-term foster care placement at age 14, representing a momentous turning point. He stayed within the care of his foster mother up until the age of 18. Later she became his legal guardian. Blake also developed a long-lasting relationship with his two foster sisters (one who is 'Imogen' in the study). At age 18, Blake moves into a private house with friends though the dynamic meant it failed to last. He later moves out of this house and set up home with his long-term girlfriend. Now, at age 21, Blake is carving a career within IT; he works in his former primary school and is near to completing an IT-related diploma. In the near future he is getting married to his long-term girlfriend and is attempting to maintain contact with his birth family. He remains in close contact with his long-term foster family, and his two younger half-sisters that were in care (one of whom has now been adopted).*

***Bronwyn** was born in Victoria in 1991 and remained in her mother's care until the age of 5, along with her three siblings. At age 5, Bronwyn entered a kinship care arrangement with her maternal grandmother. Bronwyn's entry into care resulted from involvement of Police and the statutory department when it was disclosed at school that she experienced a sexual assault from her stepfather. Bronwyn's siblings remained in the care of her mother. At age 7, Bronwyn spent Christmas with her mother for the first, and only, time whilst in care. During her time with her grandmother, Bronwyn had a 'mentor', provided through a care advocacy agency. When she was 12, her kinship care home arrangement took an unexpected turn when her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer and Bronwyn became her carer. Bronwyn's difficulties in the school environment escalated and she ceased attending full-time education. Her grandmother passed away when Bronwyn was 13, this life event was the impetus behind her entry into alternate care placements. Her time spent*

in residential care was wholly negative; especially as she experienced little support in helping her deal with the death of her grandmother and developed a drug habit. Bronwyn spent a period of 2 and half years in residential care settings, and had a total of 27 placements. Bronwyn gave birth to her first child whilst in residential care at age 13, the baby was taken into foster care and Bronwyn had limited contact due to her pervasive drug use. Bronwyn's daughter died as a toddler in an accident whilst within foster care, at the time she was 15 and pregnant with her son. Despite a determination that her son would not be placed into care, circumstances prevailed and he was taken into foster care. Her son later died in a house fire whilst in care. Later, Bronwyn entered a foster care placement herself unwittingly when she ran away from a residential placement. This chance encounter resulted in her living with a foster family until she was aged 18 and a half. Bronwyn remains close to her 'foster' mother and returned to the home for 6 months last year at age 20 as her foster mother was diagnosed with cancer. When Bronwyn left the care of her foster mother, she lived with her former partner for 2 and a half years. Bronwyn's biological parents are both deceased, her father died when she was 16 and her mother when she was 20. She presently lives with a friend in a privately rented home and has signed a year's lease. She had also recently begun a child care course. Her friendships groups consist mainly of other care leavers, these friendships were mostly forged through Agency 2 (an organization she become involved in 7 years before the meeting). In the future, she intends to travel to Bali again with some of these friends. She also would like to start a further education course and possibly move on to study Youth Work at University.

Elliot *is the middle of three children and was born in Victoria in 1991; his sister is six years older and his brother is younger than him by four years. Elliot and his siblings entered care due to the consequences surrounding parental drug abuse. Elliot's first care placement occurred at age 4; this was a kinship arrangement involving his auntie. This arrangement was short lived, and he experienced residential placements and approximately eight foster care homes between the ages of 4 and 8. Elliot was not placed alongside his younger brother for the first two years of his care trajectory, and during this time, he had little contact with his sister who remained living with their auntie. Moreover, Elliot's schooling was affected in as much as he was enrolled at six different primary schools during these early years in care. Once he reached the age of 8, he was placed, alongside his brother, in what would become a long-term foster care arrangement preliminary with a sole male carer. This foster father then entered a civil partnership and the couple became the legal guardians of Elliot, and his brother, when he reached 17. Elliot has always remained in contact with his biological parents and states he has reconciled his feelings towards them, unlike his brother who has little interest in contact, and his sister, who has decided to cease all contact. During his early time in care, he was escorted by a key worker to see his parents, and latterly his foster fathers made the trip alongside him. To Elliot, sport (especially basketball, which he plays and coaches in) has always been of importance. This*

interest has accumulated in him studying Education at university with view to being a primary school teacher specialising in physical education and health/wellbeing. Elliot remains in frequent contact with key workers from his time in care, two of which he regards as friends. He also remains close to his legal guardians and visits them regularly during time away from university. He has travelled a great deal within the US, Europe and Asia alongside his legal guardians, and hopes to do more travelling in the future. Elliot remains close to his brother and, since his initial care placement, has had contact that is more regular with his sister. At aged 19, he lives in the outer suburbs of Melbourne whilst at university, and has a long-term girlfriend.

Hayden *was born in Victoria in 1991 and spent his early years living with his birth mother, and some brief time with his biological father following his parent's separation. Between the ages of 3 and 4, Hayden enters the care system. The youngest of five children, he was the only child in the family to enter care. The older children spend most of their childhoods living with their father and, via access agreements, spent weekends with their mother. Hayden maintained contact with an older sister. Between the ages of 7 and 11, Hayden entered a kinship arrangement with his grandmother, who also schooled him at home. As his grandfather needed medical and social care, Hayden moved into his sister's home and lived with her family. During this time, Hayden also moved between various foster care placements. This transience continued between the ages of 11 and 15; Hayden estimated a total of 10 or 11 foster carers. At the age of 15 Hayden recalls a long-term foster placement that lasted around two and a half years. He left this home, following conflict with a young male in the household, and moved into his sister's home in a bungalow in her garden. Hayden continued at school during this time and enrolled on a secondary education work-experience focused certificate at age 16. Hayden received funding for school-related costs and items for his home through the statutory department and Agency 3. He also had a support worker to guide him on cleaning and cooking. Hayden's care custody order ceased after two months of living with his sister and her husband. During his 17th and 18th years, Hayden reconnected with his birth mother, and still sees his father and a few of his siblings frequently. Hayden desires his own place, and wants to move into his own one-bed accommodation in the near future. He is aiming towards finding employment in the construction trade, but has aspirations to have a construction role within the Australian defence force, or alternatively train to become a frontline soldier.*

Hari *spent the first two years of his life in New Zealand where he was born in 1992. Upon entry to Australia, accompanied by his mother and brother who two years his elder, he is taken into the care of the state of Victoria. The brothers separate from their father who remained in New Zealand, and with whom there has been no contact since. Hari approximated he had been in over 32 different placements during his care trajectory, he*

has been under the jurisdiction of the statutory department for 17 years. On occasion, Hari spent periods of time with his birth mother, in-between care placements, but he resided with her for no longer than a year at a time. During time spent at his mother's home, he experienced severe physical abuse and neglect and, on occasion, assaults of a sexual nature. At the age of 13, Hari experienced a serious physical assault through which his mother was charged by Police; these charges were later dropped. In the main, Hari was placed separately from his brother. During a foster care placement where he was placed alongside his brother, they both experienced sexual abuse from a foster parent when Hari was approximately 3 years old. He has two young half-siblings who share the same mother; they were also placed in care together or apart. Once Hari reached the age of 15, his experimentation with drugs became more regular. During this time he was absconding from care placements, he was also self-harming and attempting to commit suicide. At some point at age 15, he was taken into the care of his friend's parents - he remained in their family home for two years. Hari observed a lack of support from the statutory department as he has employment at 17. During this time he went to live with his mother again and experienced another violent attack. Events spiralled; he lost his job and later became homeless. Aged 17, he spent time on the streets with his current girlfriend. During this time, he also lived within a mental health institute and received counselling. Periods of alcoholism subsided when his girlfriend was 5-7 months pregnant. He became a father at age 18, and the couple live together. Presently, Hari has taken over the care of his younger brother whilst another arrangement is found for him following the death of his kinship carer, his grandmother. Hari is presently litigating against the statutory authority for events that occurred during his and his brother's time in their care. He hopes to work with young people and undertake a youth work-related course at university.

Imogen *was born in 1981 within Victoria and resided with her birth mother until the age of 6. Following the death of her mother (whom she found deceased in the family home due to alcohol and drug-related causes) she lives with family members until reaching 7. Between the ages of 7 and 11 she moved between various foster care family units and was eventually placed with a couple who were to be her adopted parents. This adoption legally ended when Imogen turned 12. Imogen recalls little of her earlier life experiences and attributes this to sexual trauma experienced during her childhood. At age 13, Imogen is placed with a long-term foster carer, she was her mother's first foster child. Imogen was later joined by her foster sister and a foster brother ('Blake' in the study). Imogen remained in the care and home of her long-term 'foster' mother up until giving birth to her own daughter at age 22. Imogen and her future husband resided with her mother for six months following the birth of their first child. Imogen remains close to her foster mother and has had her mother's details changed on her birth certificate to include those of this former carer. At age 24, Imogen had a second child with her husband, and began work within*

early year's education. At age 29 at the time of meeting, Imogen was undertaking a degree as a distant learner and was aspiring to become a primary school teacher.

Jessica *was born in Australia in the state of New South Wales (NSW) in 1986. Jessica spent all of her childhood in rural communities within the state. Her home life with her biological mother was transient as they moved from and to various homes in order to escape incidences of domestic violence and evade child protection authorities. Jessica was the oldest of her mother's children with four younger brothers and sisters, all these siblings entered care arrangements in separate placements from Jessica and/or each other. Jessica herself became a 'ward of the state' of NSW between the ages of 12 and 13, her first placement occurred after it transpired that she was experiencing sustained violence from her stepfather. Jessica had a total of 8 care placements delivered through statutory authority of NSW and an 'independent' child and family service. These placements included the first, a foster placement of approximately 6 -7 months; a residential unit stay of around 12 months; a further foster care arrangement that lasted around 6 months; a period of stay at some point in another residential unit, and a separate foster care arrangement; and a final 3 placements between the ages of 16 and 17 that were lead tenant arrangements. When Jessica's final lead tenant programme failed to work out, she moved to accommodation described as a 'placement' in a garden annex of a private home. She lived here for 6 months starting at age 16. Jessica's care order ceased at age 17 when she chose to leave this setting. Between the ages of 17 and 18 Jessica moved from NSW to Victoria and into independent private accommodation, and then back home with her mother and stepfather. During this time, Jessica had periods of homelessness and slept in a car. Age 19, Jessica met her long-term partner. Whilst in another privately rented accommodation setting (sometime between age 19 to the time of meeting) her sister lived with her, as did her mother and younger siblings on a separate occasion when Jessica was aged 17 and a half. Upon first entering care, Jessica became involved with Agency 2, later becoming an advocate for children in care. Jessica remains affiliated with work involving children in care through her professional role, with the statutory department being a key client, and as a part-time university Social Work student. At the time of meeting, aged 25, Jessica shares a mortgage with her fiancé and continues to live in Melbourne. Her future plans involve getting married and becoming a social worker specialising in child protection.*

Kyle *was born in Victoria in 1989 and spent his pre-care years living with his father, who had drug and alcohol dependency problems, and his mother, who had alcohol problems. Kyle's birth mother alcohol problems exacerbate a brain injury sustained during childhood and she becomes wheelchair bound when Kyle was 4. Kyle was taken into care at age 7; he entered a foster care placement. Between the ages of 11 and 12, he returns to the home of his birth mother whose alcohol problems soon resurface and he is placed back into care.*

During this time, he sporadically spent time living with his Godmother (who resided in the same town and later becomes his foster mother). Kyle spent a year longer at primary school due to his family instabilities and the amount of school missed as a result. At age 13, his father passes away because of his alcoholism whilst he was under the care of his Godmother. During this period, he regularly visits his mother, who lives nearby. Once he reached 18, he moved back into his mother's house permanently from his Godmother's home. Kyle is enthusiastic about cars, and works as a panel beater, he also works part-time as a barman in a club for service leavers. He remains in contact with both his foster carer and Godmother and has a steady girlfriend. At age 22, he hoped to pursue a career in Customs.

Nicole *was born in the state of South Australia in 1990, the second eldest of 10 children. Nicole was initially placed in foster care with her older brother, then went back to live with her biological mother. At age 2, the family relocated to the state of Victoria and she re-entered foster care on a long-term basis as she was made 'ward of the state' until the age of 18. Her biological mother would not relinquish legal guardianship of her daughter. At age 4, enters a placement with a couple who were to become her long-term foster carers. She lived with her foster carers, their biological son, and a foster sister. During this long-term foster placement she became associated with mental health services due to episodes of depression and self-harming. Between the ages of 9 and 10, Nicole is admitted to a psychiatric ward for a period of 3 months. Nicole ran away from her long-term placement an estimated 20 times due to levels of violence and physical abuse experienced sometime between the ages of 4 and 16. During this period, Nicole was placed in emergency foster care of anything between 4 and 10 weeks in duration, and always replaced in the home of long-term carers. Nicole's school life was erratic as her care circumstances forced her to enrol at different schools at various points in time. Moreover, Nicole was physically attacked by various pupils whilst at school between the ages of 10 and 11. Due to the emotional pressure experienced during her time at the foster home, Nicole had been forced to stop her dancing classes that she enjoyed between the ages of 15 and 16. Nicole decided to start dance lesson at an out-of-school dance academy, however, this was short-lived. During this time, Nicole was physically abused by the foster carers' son. Nicole remained in contact with her own older brother a couple of times a year whilst in care. During her 16th year, Nicole again ran away from her foster family, and was then taken into the home of another family who later took her to visit friends of theirs who were foster carers. Nicole remains in the home of these carers. Nicole had stayed for a period of 3 weeks at the home of these foster carers until authorities intervened, and she was returned to the home from which she ran away. Nicole finally left the care of her long-term foster carers at the age of 17; the turmoil experienced during this time means she did not complete year 11, and there are no records remaining of any work she undertook during these years that could have contributed to high school diplomas. Just after her 17th birthday, Nicole returns to the*

home of the foster carers she previously met when she made her last attempt to run away. She is returned to the home of the long-term carers. Just before her 18th birthday, Nicole runs away again to the foster carers' home. Nicole was told by the organisation through which she has a leaving care programme of support that she was unable to return to this home, therefore, Nicole lived with her biological father for a month. During this time, her foster uncle (who is related to the long-term foster carers) persuades her to enter his home where she experiences episodes of sexual abuse and physical violence. Nicole formally leaves care at 18 and moves into a 'Halfway House' for approximately two months, during this time she receives social security Youth Allowance. Upon exiting this accommodation, Nicole lives with her biological mother and later runs away to the city with her mother's known drug user friend, who placed pressure on her to experiment with drugs and enter prostitution. At some point in her 19th year, Nicole locks herself into a hotel room and forces herself to detox from drugs. Nicole returns to the final 'foster carers' and is admitted to a psychiatric facility, she did not agree with the course of medication being prescribed and so leaves the unit and returned to the carers' home. Now age 20, Nicole receives funding from Agency 3 for an educational course and a home computer. She had also enrolled on a part-time massage course at college. Nicole met her boyfriend at the age of 20 and lived with him at the time of meeting, at the home of her 'foster carers', alongside two other young people formally fostered. Nicole is not employed and receives disability benefits as she is under a course of treatment for depression and sleeping problems. She receives counselling and is involved with general mental health services. Nicole will remain in her current accommodation for the near future and is due to start dance classes again. She hoped to become engaged and marry in two years' time. In five years' time, she planned to move into her own home. She would like to find employment so to fund her ambition of opening an animal sanctuary within the ground of her home. Nicole would like to become a foster carer rather than have her own children.

Shannon *was born in Victoria in 1990, she had three older sisters and one older brother, and her mother later gave birth to a younger sister. Shannon entered care at age 2 due to her birth mother's severe mental health problems. She moved numerous times between her mother's home and foster care up until the age of 7. As a now permanent 'ward of the state' at the age of 7, as a result of her mother entering a long-term care home, Shannon had a variety of care placements up until leaving care at 18. These included family foster care, home-based residential care, and 'high-risk' supported residential units. During her earlier placements, Shannon was placed in the care of her sister, however, they later parted and she re-entered other forms of care. Shannon's contact with her mother was infrequent, and remains so. During this time, Shannon spends short periods in a succession of schools. Shannon spent a long period as an adolescent in a high-risk unit and took part in the associated education programme. At age 17, Shannon settled in a house as part of a lead tenant programme delivered through a foster care agency in Melbourne for a period of 6*

months. At 18, upon leaving care, Shannon has periods of homelessness over a period of two years. Aged 21 at the time of the meeting, Shannon was accommodated in a caravan park whilst awaiting a decision from the Housing Ministry regarding permanent social housing as her year's funding from Agency 3 is due to expire. It is unclear why Shannon was accommodated inappropriately, but she has a key worker who is assisting her. At the time, Shannon was in a relationship with a 27-year-old seeking asylum from the Sudan. He is due to reside with her imminently. Shannon is receiving assistance for 'health and wellbeing concerns' through a Melbourne-based community organisation that seeks to alleviate the impact of poverty. In the future, Shannon expressed that she wants to get married and have children. She also aspires to find stable accommodation and complete an animal husbandry course at college in order to become a rescuer of wild animals. In the meantime, she would like to find employment to support herself. Shannon placed significant importance upon tracing her biological father, whom she had never met, and gain further access to care files in the future.

The significance of these webs of relationships presented above - and the typically indeterminate nature of care relations - renders understanding and analysing relatedness in the purview of transitional experiences challenging. I therefore drew on the *linked lives* concept as a lens for exploring webs of relationships that traverse individual's life trajectories (either through intergenerational influence or with relationships existing in parallel to trajectories). Moreover, exploring the agentic quality of relational negotiation posed a further obstacle, not solely due to the nature of fractured kinship ties across and beyond care trajectories, but also due to the institutional influence upon care trajectories that do not help demystify the extent of scope for agentic negotiation of familial relations. The next section will describe how the narrative analysis proceeded.

5.3. The relatedness facet: A voice relational orientation to analysis of relations

> *With my mum, it didn't feel wrong. It felt alright, but when that ended it was just like well that's it. I think my whole life I've searched for that, but I didn't know that's what I was looking for and I still don't. I just 'do'. My whole life I've been searching for something and when I thought I'd found it I'd ruined it because I guess I was scared that I'd lose it. I would reject you before you could reject me…* (Joe)

This section introduces the relatedness facet with particular reference to an analytical approach chosen for the storied data (the voice-centred relational method developed by Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) that had potential to induce the significance of relational connections to the meanings of transitional experience. As aforementioned, a facet methodology orientates research towards an appreciation of transitional experiences vis-à-vis the social dynamic of relatedness. This section turns attention to the choices I made about a narrative analysis of the life story data. In all, I required an approach that enabled me to explore the dynamics around individual meanings ascribed to transitional experiences and the interception of relatedness to sense making.

The available literature described a variance of ways in which narrative analysis is approached, as narrative texts in essence are discernible through the individuals' emphases within their stories, and of course, the nature of the research in question. For this reason, it is my view, that few analytical frames can be readily acquired for life story data, unless the sample number is particularly large requiring a themed template or linguistic pattern tracing in the text. I therefore used my intuition about the stories I had to seek to derive understanding of the transition biography with analytical appreciation of the facets.

I decided initially to incorporate the voice-centred relational method (VRM), a technique set-out by Mauthner and Doucet (1998) appreciating that stories are embedded in the discursive and social context of relationships. I selected two life stories from each country-context to 'pilot' this, and carried out four readings of the whole text according to the VRM. Along the way, I selected narrative units consistent with the ascribed essence of the reading. The VRM analysis of Alex and Jessica's stories amounted to around 13 thousand words. In presentational terms, for a thesis, this was concerning as I had eighteen in-depth stories remaining through which to bring together and offer findings. I also realised that seeking address to the theoretical questions I had relating to transition did not seem plausible if there were scant scope for analytical consistency between the texts. Coherency and an element of comparison across texts were important to support the validity of my analysis, and contribute to an integrative understanding of the transition biographies via the methodological facets.

I now present an overview of the four readings, these induced the selection of narrative units within Alex and Jessica's stories that synchronised with the essence of the readings (see Appendix 3 and 4 for complete VRM analytical documents). As aforementioned, these four readings followed the analytical approach of Mauthner and Doucet (1998). I will then move onto a discussion of how aspects of the VRM analysis influenced my own frame of meaning for drawing out the unique (yet comparable) 'voices' from within and across the texts, so to shape the findings (as presented across Chapters Six to Eight).

5.3.1. The four readings

The first reading traces the central storyline whereby the researcher maps the overall story. It traces the main events or aspects of the story emphasised by the participants as representing turning points, the 'protagonists' in the story, and the inherent subplot to the story. The biographical synopses, as derived from tracing the care trajectories of the participants, had allowed for a sense of the main events and turnings points within the stories. The reading also allowed opportunity for reflecting upon my own interpretation of the text, this helped me think more deeply about the research relationship facet. Guided by intuition, I proceeded to trace the plot and subplot (and writing my reader response) drawing out narratives that were emblematic of, in the words of Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 129), the 'recurrent images, words, metaphors and contradictions in the narrative.'

The second reading - tracing the voice of the I - hones in on how the participants represent themselves and allows the analyst the sense of who the person is through the 'active I which is telling the story' (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 131). Narrative units were colour-highlighted across the two stories that incorporated personal pronouns such as 'I', 'we', and 'you'; this reading accentuated self-representations and points in the story where the active 'I' shifts to the 'we' and 'you'. I found this reading added a significant layer to the analysis, one that integrated well with the sensory ethnographic aspect of the data collection, as it refocuses upon semiotic meanings buried within narrative life stories of experience. Representations of self throughout the life story (or junctures in the story telling where active meaning making was occurring) were drawn out of this reading as the shifts from the

'I' marked clear breaks from overt self-presentations to representations of the self in relation to the other and, therefore, the social location of the narrator.

The third reading concerns relationships and switched analytical attention towards Alex and Jessica's social networks, inclusive of familial and kinship ties. The reading essentially traced how the participant discusses relationships. In highlighting narrative units that discussed relationships, I was able to derive how relatedness is experienced, in that, which relationships were suggestive of being inhibiting or enabling in terms of transition and notions of selfhood. The forth reading aimed to place the narrator - Alex and Jessica – and the storied narratives within the broader context of culture and socio-political discourse. In doing so, I selected narratives focussed upon reflection of direct social work practice imbued within the narratives of experience. The reading also, importantly, analysed narrative units suggestive of sense making centring on commonalities with the broader 'youth' and transition experience. The reading traced narratives that positioned experiences of care trajectories within other trajectories common to a youth period of the life course.

5.3.2. Analytical frame of meaning

The voice-centred relational method crafted by Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) for analysing narrative stories integrates the four readings outlined above. I carried out these analytical readings as a pilot with the intention to glean where the narrative focal points would lie for the remaining life stories. Each analytical reading written-up together presented concise knowledge of Alex and Jessica's significant transitional experiences as narrated within a

richer frame of reference regarding their sense making (in view of notions of self and relatedness). Illustration 4 offers recognised dominant narrative foci taken from each reading of the overall life story text of Alex and Jessica - these sensitised me to narratives within the remaining stories in a less pre-figured and drawn out fashion. Therefore, discrete 'readings' of the life story text allowed for cohesive understanding of the transition biography of Alex and Jessica, with key emphases in the narratives derived, offering subsequent frames of analytical meaning. The readings here are distinguishable by the analytical categories (for instance, main plot); each root metaphor imbued in the associated narrative unit consistent with that category represents narrative foci, a possible template for analysis of the remaining life stories.

I was keen not to use a prefigured analytical frame through which 'interrogate' the data, though subsequent analysis of another life story still seemed sticky. I now had various templates through which to match to narrative units and analyse in one focussed reading rather than four. As opposed to backtracking, I fathomed that the first two VRM analyses were important in sensitising me to the dominant narrative tropes used to convey experience across the storied data. The narrative focal points derived naturally linked or collapsed into each other; this was, however, dependent upon the nature of the storytelling and therefore how expansive the narrative scope across the story was.

Illustration 4: The dominant narrative emphases from two VRM readings

Reading 1: Central storyline

- **Main plot (lived experiences and structured aspects)** stability or transience; care as 'family'; long-term foster carers or alternate families; scope for therapeutic relations; independence by default or developing independent identity
- **Subplot (storied nature)** how traceable and coherent are links between past, present and future; use of metaphor reconcilation of past experience; consistency of expressed self - how past framed, who present selves are and how related to future; identity as 'care leaver ' - organisational, multi-voiced collective story?
- **Reader response (constructive nature)** researcher effects evident in the story telling?

Reading 2: The voice of the 'I'

- **Semiotic and metaphoric aspects** desired future transitions; desired past and imagined future families; held and expressed notions of independence; ontology of support - contradictions in relation to notions of support; presentation of self through sensory material.

Reading 3: Relationships

- **Relational 'agency'** family displays, who is family; experiences within 'care' family units; where lies alternate support; breaking or reforming ties.

Reading 4: Broader contexts

- **Resisting labels** perceived policy and practice messages; experiences of services and identified structural constraints; how care-experienced young people are problematised; contested identities.

The VRM readings, therefore, became a looser frame of reference helping to orientate myself to the data. As I had now derived what I termed care trajectories that unravelled breadth of lived transitional experienced (as shown in Section 5.2), and gained a sense of the structuring of the stories, I retreated from the analytical layers and decided to refocus. I soon decided to hone in on tracing the 'voice of the I' within the stories, and begun to derive very interesting semiotic and metaphoric emphases in the stories indicative of sense making (thus developing an analytical 'sense making' facet). Sense making was induced from within common metaphors used to describe the nature of transitional experiences. Individual deviations as expressed within the participants' relational frames of reference, and inter-connected perspectives on independence, were also presented across the findings.

In recognising that there is a relative paucity of literature offering specific 'how to' detail on qualitative data analysis, supportive of contemporary methodological orientations, I returned to using intuition following what I observed from the VRM readings. Seemingly, the sticking points encountered in the analysis phase are reflective of reading existing literature on narrative analysis. This literature essentially either places emphasis upon the chronological form, linguistic turns, and overall consistency in the telling of the life story (for example, following Wengraf, 2001), or analyses discrete narrative units within the story with each taken to express and bound particular themed experiences in the narrator's life (in following Kohler Riessman, 1993). I thus continued to analyse the stories guided by the concept of the transition biography, and extracted key narrative units that would evoke

sense making of lived experiences - mindful that lives are in perpetual transition and not readily 'bounded' and accessible within narrative form.

5.4. Chapter summary

Importantly, this chapter has introduced the stories of the participants through biographical synopses of their transitional experiences (as derived through the care trajectory facet). The chapter has also broached the challenges inherent in seeking to explore the relational nature of transitional experience that present across an individual biography. It has introduced two facets, the care trajectory and relatedness facet, and offered detail on the process of analysis that has induced the findings presented across Chapter Six to Eight.

CHAPTER SIX - FINDINGS: CARE TRAJECTORIES 1-3

6.1. Introduction: Presenting the findings

The following three chapters present the findings of the study. For presentational purposes, the chapters are distinguishable through the inductive analytical interconnectivity between the care trajectory facet and the sense making facet of the transition biography. The care trajectory facet represents narratives of transitional experiences of institutional relations and family displays, as evoked from the biographical synopses of the participants' life stories. This facet also essentially traced the commonality in transitional experiences between the participants, that is, the nature of their care trajectories and multiplicity of care-related family transition. The findings from the narrative analysis of the life stories are clustered according to baseline care trajectory types – including age at entry into care, whether a long-term foster care placement was experienced, and whether the participant transitioned from a long-term care setting or not.

As Section 5.3 explored, the semiotic and metaphoric aspects imbued in the stories were to be the analytical focal points in terms of evoking individual sense making from within the narratives. In order to seek analytical coherency and comparability, important to build theoretical conclusions regarding transition, the connections between the care trajectory facet and sense making facet were forged within the findings. The sense making facet emphases the semiotic meaning ascribed to transitional independence. Through clustering participant biographies according to the nature of their care trajectories, I could ascribe

metaphors that emphases the semiotic quality of those experiences as narrated across the life stories. This allowed for the shaping of distinguishable transition biographies of the young people. Still, the findings are very much expressions of the individual lives as accentuating the theme of interconnectivity between the facets. The care trajectories were helpful in shaping and writing-up the findings, but also allowed for the analytical presentation of the participants own 'semiotic turns' as narrated and thus their individuality.

This chapter presents care trajectories 1-3 and highlights a discussion of the narrative units that were reflective of meanings ascribed to transitional experiences, and the associated sense making about notions of self and relatedness. Table 2 offers a simple guide linking both transitional and independence metaphors induced from the findings to the transition biographies.

Table 2: The analytical metaphors derived for transition and independence

Care trajectory facet	Participant biographies	Sense making facet	
	Pseudonyms	**Analytical metaphor for narrated transitional experiences**	**Analytical metaphor for independence**
Entered care during or beyond adolescence; transitioned from a long-term placement (or will do so)	Alex, Leila and Venice	Reconstructive	Channelled independence
Entered care during or beyond	Jessica	Re-assertion of control	Responsibilised independence

adolescence; did not experience a long-term foster care placement			
Entered long-term foster care placement during or beyond adolescence, did not transition from this placement	Callie and Zafar	Constrictive	Curtailed independence
Entered care in early childhood; transitioned to a long-term placement pre-adolescence and transitioned from this home	Elliot, Eva and Kyle	Renewal	Self-constructing independence
Entered care in early childhood; transitioned to a long-term placement as a teenager and left close to or beyond cessation of care order	Blake, Bronwyn, Tori, Charlotte, Imogen and Emma	Transformative	Independence as status change
Entered care in early childhood; experienced long-term foster care placements at some point, did not transition from this placement	Hayden, Nicole and Hari	Regressive	Pseudo-independence
Entered care in early childhood; did not enter nor transition from a long-term placement	Joe and Shannon	Fortuitous	Independence as hyper - dependency

6.2. Care trajectory 1: Experiencing reconstructive transitions amid channelled independence

Three of the participants who entered care past the age of 10 entered foster care placements that each lasted between four and seven years, up until their care orders ceased at age 18. Two of these three had transitioned from the home of their 'foster carers' at the ages of 19 and 20 at the time of the meeting, the third remains with his former carers at age 19. All of these particular young people experienced maternal abuse and neglect to varying degrees (as narrated). Each drew on the role of the foster home in stabilising their routes to post-care independence given their experiences, in the sense that they have a greater sense of control over the timing over their transition to 'independent living'. In other words, the transition did not occur due to a necessity to leave and have a default independent state forced upon them due to circumstances beyond their control. The transition biographies within care trajectory 1 'reconstructive' analytical metaphors that reflects the young peoples' meaning making of their narrated experiences connected with notions of 'channelled independence'. Findings according to care trajectory 2 and 3 will follow, and the participants' sense making will be subsequently discussed in view of interconnectivity.

6.2.1. Alex and Venice: Foster family as relational agency negating default independence

Care trajectory 1 is well exemplified through Venice's life story narrations. Venice was placed in a foster care setting when her first foster care placement broke down. This was meant to

be a short-term placement, but Venice stayed at her carers ('mum and dad') for up to 9 years until leaving home less than a year before the meeting to live with her former foster sister. In relation to how the success of her foster home helped build her independent character, Venice exclaimed:

> *I don't live with them anymore, because I'm independent now….I really didn't want to go into foster care, but when I moved to live with them everything fell into place. The only time I really felt I was in care as such was when my social worker came around and said 'hey'…I was in care going through the processes, but that was the only actual time I felt like I was in care. My care home was virtually the best that I could actually wish for. In that sense, I'm lucky.*

Venice's comfortable integration into this family unit and close relations with her foster parents, their natural children, and her foster sister allowed her to gain a sense of independence 'independent' of the care system, and also from experiencing the negative connotations towards experience the 'care system' that other life stories raised. In narrative episodes relating to how she felt more so part of a family home than a system of care, she explained:

> *…one [social worker] that I had was obsessed with coming around. I've had over 10 social workers. It's ridiculous. The majority of them I saw like twice a year, and I don't know if this was illegal or something. When I found a home that was stable for me, I didn't need to act up or anything like that. So, it was never actually a problem where they had to call…*

Venice's developing sense of self as a member of a tight family unit helped her when faced with social workers she felt were not valuing her independent nature and allowing her to assert her own wishes. Venice narrated how her external relations with social workers were clouded due to a lack of trust on her part following bad experiences of a previous few. However, generally, her interpretations of the meetings she had with them, about her life, were not centred on her future course of action. Instead, she sensed she was labelled as a child who had experienced abuse and neglect and, after her immediate health and wellbeing needs were addressed, they did not try to get to know her in order to support her wishes and desires for the future. For example, Venice narrates below:

> *I didn't trust any of my social workers, so they didn't get anything from me. If they needed to get anything about me, they got it from my foster parents. I never sat down and spoke to them, because they're not interested in what I do, what I've got to say, and nothing like that. Even my Pathway Plan, they didn't care. My foster mum had to deal with them. I just refused to do it. I didn't want to talk to them. I found that some of them were just very, very rude…they need to get to know the person that they're working with, rather than just looking at what they've read. Because people change, and people move on in their lives…You need to build a relationship…'Cos my social worker had 50 other case. Yeah, I think I was known by a number. I don't know what number I was, or what number case I was with her….*

She recalls how her foster mum would talk on her behalf and so acted as the necessary buffer to the stresses she felt around this:

> *… because my foster mum knew everything that I did. Me and her are like best friends, I talk to her about so many things, so she could fill in - she knew*

how to say things on my behalf at the time, because I wouldn't talk to them. Sometimes in a big review…

In tracing Venice's life story, and the associated key transitions, it is clear that expressed fortitude above arose from receiving emotional support from her long-term foster carers at crucial points during the key transitional experiences following entry into care. This ability to have a sound emotional basis from which to explore the possibility of subsequent future movement into independence was echoed within Alex's life story. Alex narrated how he had periods of jostling with both care and educational services in order to plan his specific future education trajectories and the desired path he would like to take his life in order to fulfil his future ambitions:

…from my own personal experience, it's very poor [services], which will result in people that are doing sixth form and college courses to fail better because they have no stable grounding because they don't have the support and knowledge to do what they wanna do. This results in my knowledge of people wanting to just get out and do things their own way which, in a statistical sense, I would imagine, would be to make people leave foster care and go into independent living and fall flat on their face. That's my personal opinion and insight into foster care leavers.

An interesting point of reflection in reading this narrative excerpt is that Alex is discussing his future independence in terms of the plight of other care leavers, those he has known in particular, and extrapolating this knowledge into a generalised opinion on service impetus. In the above narration, Alex goes some way in providing his perspective on the impact of a potential absence of long-term carers to his own present life choices and future life course

should he have been in a different circumstance. Alternate narrations within his story place emphasis on the support of Alex's long-term foster cares in assisting him to negotiate desired trajectories to highlight this associated significance. Alex's life story, in this sense, very much echoed Venice's portrayals of her foster mother supporting her during contact with services she felt misconstrued her identity and failed to engage with her as an individual. In discussing this kind of relatedness, Alex narrates:

> *I loved it, you know. Just having people in my life that can turn around and say 'well, we can't do this for you'; and having someone else turn around and say 'hang on a minute, yes you can. And this is how you're gonna do it because if you don't you're going to have problems'.*

Alex narrates about a plethora of issues relating directly to the care and after-care services trying to force his transitions towards independent living and move him into pathways away from his desired educational trajectories. Alex's subjective perspective thus arises from this recourse to make his own choices, and his notions of independence are bounded by this. Whilst Alex holds very clear ideas around seeking independence in the future though achieving his goals, Venice spoke more of her present life and the sense of independence that is developing. Venice's foci in relation to this felt state predominately surround leaving the home of her foster parents as it has provided an opportunity in 'getting to know me again'. However, she somewhat downplays the year's events and the various life changes she has made:

> *On leaving care, there really hasn't been that much. I've just been travelling. I went on holiday. I work, and I make my own money, I just go on holidays...I go out with my friends and work. What I'm doing at present is just waiting to get my flat done, by myself…Yeah, at present, I'm in charge of that. I'm doing what I want to do…Yeah, a goodish year. I've got a job…I'll finish off my A-Levels, and that's that.*

Importantly, though, the developed confidence that she has in having a sense of control over her trajectories is crucial. Whilst Venice mocked herself in mentioning that she only lives 10 minutes away from her former foster parents, and that 'they haven't changed my room and stuff', her on-going relationship with the family unit seemingly has helped bolster this confidence. However, she also surmises that moving out of the family home has provided the space to build a sense of independent self. This sense is highlighted well in the following narrative in which she traces her past into the future in consolidating her experiences and drawing out how her independent identity has been shaped:

> *My past is my past. In a way, I'm grateful of my past, because I wouldn't have been the person I am today, I wouldn't have met the most wonderful carers in the world. I've had a second chance, or a third chance to just restart that life again…My past has not been brilliant or anything like that, but it's taught me to be independent and it's taught me not to get too depressed and think I'm not good enough. I've just got to fight harder.*

The expressed reflection that her past has 'taught her to be independent' is perhaps crucial to understanding the situation of care-experienced young people moving from care settings. However, as Venice transitioned form a long-term foster care setting in which there were strong displays of family bonds, it is difficult to understand the genesis of beliefs around the

state of taught independence that has arisen from having that period of stability, reflection and relative control over future. Is it the case of care experiences fostering an independent identity or that living in relatively stable and happy environments allows for this independence to be channelled? Certainly, upon inducing Alex and Venice's sense making, in particular, the relative stability that arose out of their respective family lives afforded them the opportunity of self-discovery and acting upon their own future desires.

6.2.2. Leila: Family transitions predisposing channelled independence

The significance of a re-established family life pre-independent living is also exemplified well through Leila's life story. Leila's narratives of transition placed more emphasis upon how both pre-care and care experiences of family life shaped her ideals surrounding independence. The relational aspects of transition came to the fore within Leila's story and weaved throughout narratives of the past, present and future portrayal of an independent self. Much emphasis was placed upon her relationship with her long-term foster mother, whose home she remained in upon until the age of 20. Throughout her story, the importance of her foster mother and her extended foster family (including foster grandparents, sisters, cousins and close friends of the family) became apparent whilst Leila was drawing upon her photographs. Leila entered foster care at the age of 14, and was separated from her siblings once this placement became her long-term family home. Leila's narrations of her initial movement into care, and the subsequent court case which saw her status change to a permanent care order, hinge upon an inner conflict in her interpretations regarding these transitions:

> *For a good few months after I'm like look, I want to go home, I miss my dad. Because my dad were all I'd ever known. I thought I had that kind of loyalty to him. Basically I kept being told lies. [Social workers] kept going 'yes, you'll be going home soon. In a few more days'. Then a couple of months later in the court case, I was 'I don't want to go home'. I really didn't. Don't get me wrong, I was kind of upset when the court case came back that I was staying in care. Because I knew it meant I weren't ever going to live with my brothers again.*

The relational aspects of these transitions are quite vivid in Leila's story, highlighting that a transition into care does not mark a singular 'transitional' event, but the complexities of movement into care are marked by dynamic shifts in various statuses and relational contexts that intensify across time. This dynamic quality influences not just how transitions are experienced, but how transitions are narrated in the present. She described how the subsequent years after been taken into care are 'just one big blur…with everything appearing mad and so unbelievable'. Despite this blurring of perceptions of time recollected in relation to childhood transitions, in the process of narrating her life story Leila was able to express the interplay between her relationships with her birth and foster family, movements from and to care, and the temporal context. As Leila was pregnant at the time of meeting, her explorations of the past and her self-confessed blurriness of key events were characterised through forward-thinking view of independence and certain clarity about the future. Leila's recollections of the past were frequently triggered by perceptions of impending motherhood and her future focus was stimulated by narrations of this kind:

There have been times when I've sat there and I've thought to myself 'oh my God', I'm going to be a crap mother basically. But then I think back - and when I look at pictures , or even speak to my real parents – when I finish on the phone to them I just think to myself you know what, I'm determined to be a good mother. There's no reason why I shouldn't be. I'm nothing like them….just because they weren't capable of being good parents; it doesn't mean I'm not. It's not exactly like its hereditary being a bad parent.

Leila's view of independence, as such, was attuned to her impending motherhood, even her instrumental reasons behind leaving the home of her former foster carers was stimulated by this. She was able to continue to remain in this home, and the house was converted to allow her for this. Leila recollected that she was comfortable to stay as had her own space, but 'felt it were time' to leave as she 'got frustrated with what was happening'. Leila moved into her own place early into her pregnancy as tensions between her and her former foster mother were intensifying, and they 'were both treading on egg shells around each other'. She goes on to explain how the tension eased upon leaving home and the relationship has remained intact, as Leila had hoped. Leila states that she readily became independent in instrumentally building her own home:

When I moved out it is like an instinct kicked in. when I lived at my mum's my bedroom were always a mess – typical teenager really. When I moved in here it's like an instinct kicked in. I basically got better with my money. I'd clean up all the time. It just like something in here's gone {clicks fingers}.

Leila emphasised the pride she has in her independence at building her own home through a narrative episode relating to her 'Uncle Billy', a friend of her birth father, who came to visit her after a 9 year separation:

> *As soon as he saw me he started crying…he said 'I'm telling you now, the next time I speak to your dad I'm going to be telling him how much better off you are without him'. He said you've done a lot for you place. You've got a nice little flat here. You've done well. He said I'm proud that you've done stuff – like, there was college and sixth form.*

This recognition of her independence was underpinned and spurred by knowledge in the family that Leila was placed in care because of her father's criminality. Whilst her narrations of the genesis of notions of independence were somewhat ambiguous, the clarity of her future independent self was undoubtedly stimulated by the near birth of her daughter. Many of her narrations of the present and future were built around preparing for motherhood or mentally reconciling her relations with her birth parents with view to becoming a 'good mother'. It seems the encouragement for her achievements in continuing to engage in school, mentoring and presenting at a carers support group has certainly helped bolster her confidence at living independently into the present. At the support group, she narrates how another carer told her: 'I know it's down to your mum, but you're a big credit to yourself as well'. She recalls how she thought that 'I suppose I am really, because you need to help yourself as well'. This delineates Leila's story and her perceptions of independence away from those expressed within the previous life stories. In other words, her story does not suggest she holds independence to be something that was *taught,* or indeed a state that was imposed on her. She seems to imply that she was taught to think independently, but motherhood sped that process up, rather than the transition away from her previous care status.

Her life story suggests that she was not thrown into a state of independence but was encouraged to think independently through the necessity to care for her siblings, by her foster mother and being involved, alongside her, with various foster care-related groups. This aspect of her past instilled the 'you need to help yourself as well' outlook. As she narrates:

> *Yes. They were like you can't expect us to help you when you can't help yourself basically. The way I see things is treat people the way you'd expect to be treated yourself, which is with respect. You have to give respect to earn it. Fair enough, I've given my mum some hard times. But I'll always respect her for everything she's done for me. I even referred to my real mum as an egg donor. I'm not afraid to admit that. At the end of the day, she walked on me when I was two and my little brother was six months old. What sort of a mother does that? I couldn't have forgiven myself if owt happened to my kid. I'd be like, why have you done that? Why put them in that situation?*

Again, here we see the credence given towards her familial relations in relation to her transition into independent life. Whilst she discusses relative stability in her home life upon entering care, and the closeness and happiness she felt with her foster family, Leila's birth family have seemingly been pushed to the forefront of her mind at the moment due to some ambiguity with regards to if her father is her biological one. In this sense, Leila seems to be facing a difficult time in exerting her own independent self as she is currently experiencing this emotional upheaval. Within her story, she flits from a viewpoint that there is a deterministic aspect to her family life as experienced and, as such, she needs to mentally reconcile this and move forward:

The thing is I don't know whether I'm thinking subconsciously - well, I know I want to mad at them, I really do. As I say, I want to hate them with a passion. But, then again, it might be me subconsciously being the bigger person; thinking you've done this to me, it's happened, I hate you for it. At the end of the day it's happened. I can't change what's happened.

On the other hand, Leila has a strong desire to rebuild these family relations for the sake of her daughter. In narrations exploring the felt need to find out who her biological father, she demarcates her birth family from the foster one for the first time.

I just keep thinking to myself would it really matter who my dad is. Then, when it's the other way round, I think yes, it would, because my daughter would grow up actually knowing who her family is, her proper family…Because at the end of the day she's going to want to know about family, isn't she?... I honestly don't know what to do for the best; because it's like will it really matter to her, in here. I know all she needs is me. As long as I'm there for her she's not bothered, but inside - but then again it's like what if something happens to me…

6.3. Care trajectory 3 and 4: Experiencing constrictive transitions or transitions as reasserting control

Callie and Zafar's care trajectories involved transitions into foster care at 13 and 14 respectively, they both experienced a long-term foster care placement, although they did not transition directly from this when their care orders ceased. Jessica, on the other hand, did not experience a long-term foster care setting but also entered care during adolescence between the ages of 12 and 13. The forthcoming sections will discuss the derivation of Callie and Zafar's transitional experiences as constrictive, whilst Jessica's narratives accentuated

the need to regain control over her destiny. It highlights how Callie and Zafar's sense of independence is curtailed due to various trajectories they are negotiating, whilst metaphors suggestive of a sense of reponsibilisation came out strongly within Jessica's narratives.

6.3.1. Zafar: Moving forward, yet independence is curtailed

Upon representing Leila's transitions, she explicitly explores the relational aspects of these transitional experiences through drawing on her memories of family life and desired kinship experiences in the future. Implicit in her explorations around notions of independence is how the temporalities of transitions into an independent self are influenced by impending motherhood, but subsumed by a background of fractured family life. In all, her experiences of transitions, on the whole, run counter to formal care processes, as do Zafar's but within a distinctly differing transitional context. With respect to Zafar's life story a sense is gained that his transitions, in particular those symbolising notions of adult independence, are not bounded socially by dominant relational talk.

Instead, Zafar's transitions are weighted towards the objectified state of movement between social statuses due to the socio-legal processes his future trajectories are entwined with. Transitions from care to independence have been accelerated due to a discrepancy regarding his age on his migration paperwork - his age was noted as being a year older whilst undertaking questioning by Home Office officials after being found by Police in the Midlands. As such, Zafar's notions of independence are tied to gaining citizenship rights of stay. They are derailed further by the ambiguity in his care leaver status and premature disentitlement

to care leaver support services (including his current accommodation setting). This ambiguity understandably had ramifications in the construction of Zafar's life story. In discussing the characteristics of the life story approach, and suggesting working on a timeline to overcome the initial stumbling blocks, Zafar remarked: 'The problem is, I can't make a decision about tomorrow {laughter}. Can't make a decision what I'm doing now, then what to do tomorrow, [and] what to do the next day'.

Interestingly, Zafar's narrations of his past life and future hopes developed in the course of the life story. Towards the close of the meeting, Zafar exclaimed: 'When you asked about it, it is difficult to remember. But when you are talking about it, there's a lot'. This somewhat reflects the magnitude of events that Zafar has endured since making the journey from his parent's home in rural Afghanistan at the age of 14. Zafar's life story contained an extensive narrative on his journey from Afghanistan, to his aunt's home in Pakistan, until he arrived in the UK 3-and-a-half months later. The journey Zafar made with various illegal migration agents was fraught with dangerous occurrences. These included: night-time travel in areas with land mines across the borders of Pakistan, Iran and Turkey; sea journeys on makeshift boats off the coasts of Turkey and Greece; interrogation on an Army ship, and bribery by officials to avert custody; and long, difficult journeys on cargo vehicles from Greece to Italy and, then through the Channel Tunnel and into the UK.

Zafar spent the majority of his journey from Afghanistan amongst adults who were '…just risking their lives, as they have no choice'. Herein lies an interesting distinction drawn by

Zafar; how he places little agency on those adults making the journey, but he had a choice, an option to stay in Afghanistan. However, his desire for better childhood and future overrode this. The cultural context in which Zafar was raised certainly clashes with normative ideals of a *good childhood.* In relation to this dangerous period of travel to the UK, he states:

> *Yeah, I was the youngest. I was the youngest, and I was the bravest. They were scared {laughter} - really scared. After all that, when I got here, I realised what a risky journey I had. It was just about the surviving or dying…just if you want to survive, you have to work hard. If you start fighting it, you never get out of there.*

In many ways, Zafar was making decisions prematurely relative to the temporally-bounded Western norms pertaining to being a child. The dangerous circumstances he was enduring during his journey imposed a state of independence, as he was making the journey alone and amongst adults who were in family or peer groups. This certainly underscored his self-professed bravery. His narrations of his past life in Afghanistan within the parental home evoke an understanding that transition from this home did not mark a change in social status from child (in the Western-centric sense of this status) to independent young person (or even akin to other life stories, that is, a transitional status change from child to child in care). Zafar highlighted the importance he placed on education, and the absence of schooling, which was to be a contributing factor in tension between himself and his parents before he left home. A fair proportion of his narrations of the past focus upon the absence of available schooling opportunities, as they were not easily obtainable or affordable in rural villages.

Zafar narrates that the genesis of his motivation to journey to another country resulted from his desire to be educated and no longer work on his parent's farm, having being a farm labourer since early childhood. This desire led to tension with his parents who, according to Zafar, gave him the ultimatum: 'If you want to stay with us you have to do this. But if you don't want to do this, then go wherever you like'. In this sense, Zafar's transitions do not fall within the typical socially constructed pathways of the other participants due to the cultural and economic context of the village in which he was born. As such, notions of independence in terms of transitions from childhood to adulthood statuses are not readily traceable due to Zafar's culturally-specific (in the context of the research cases) trajectory. Zafar enforced his own perceptions of what an education would mean and represent in his life and followed his ascribed desired transitions into independence, in terms of transitioning from his family home, despite having the option to remain if he had forgone his wishes.

A form of childhood independence was engrained in Zafar early on, one that seemingly countered general Western notions of childhood agency in the absence of a slipstream of atypical pathways to adulthood. In comparing Zafar's life story in relation to the other cases, it is deduced that family tensions regarding notions of independence arose in the context of dynamics relating to caring for siblings at a young age, caring for a relative, or with foster carers, or within specific post-care accommodation settings. Later transitions towards adult independence post-care tended to occur through: expressions of care fatigue and the need to be independent of the associated social status and services; building their own family units or reconciliation with family members; expressions of a desire to leave the home of

long-term foster carers, as this suited their own envisaged life course trajectory; or a lack of foresight with regards to what the future entails for relational and perceived reasons. Zafar's narratives of his experience of transitions towards independence reflect an overt lack of control in determining his future course due to his socio-legal status. The effect being, as he narrates, that: '…I can't make any decisions. If you know your status, you can make decisions about what you are going to do and what you are going to become next'. This highlights the objective nature of his transitions being pushed to the fore of both his narratives of his experiences and perceptions of independence, and made unpacking the other transitional dynamics tricky. One expressed ideal which would clearly mark adult independence for Zafar would be the ability to repay the money he received from his aunt to meet the costs of travel to the UK, on his aunt's decision, via immigration agents. As he narrates: 'I remember her everywhere I've been'.

Across other narrative episodes, Zafar delineates a sense of independence in relation to his positive care experiences. He explains that he had a sound relationship with his long-term foster carer who, as a first-language English speaker, was able to help him develop his English skills in ways his previous foster carers could not. He narrates how his life fell into a steady routine, one he was content with involving an International School and College, volunteering and part-time work. He moves on to emphasise how leaving home at 18 marked a transition to a new life and a state of feeling responsible for everything:

> *..I had a little job earning £30 per week, and I'd give £20 to my carer…It was really good; she was cooking all the time and washing as well. And after I moved, I really missed it. I wanted to stay there, too. Because there was two other guys who were living there; they stayed until age 20…So I wished I could have stayed longer because at least I didn't have responsibilities…because if you live in your own flat or shared house you have a whole, whole responsibility for the house, for everything. You obviously have to take care of yourself as well.*

From Zafar's narrations of his life story about his key transitions, it is apparent that notions of temporality in relation to independence and specific care transitions are not always pinned to past recollection. Zafar's narrations strongly indicate a belief that independence is not borne out of learning from or reconciling past experiences and/or drawing a line under the past, but moving forward into the future following his positive care experience. This attitude is reflected in the following narration:

> *I got into safe hands; and I've been looked after well. The main problem was that I had severe language barriers, so I couldn't speak English at all…The five years I've been here have gone really easy. It's gone really quick. I can't imagine that I've been her five years, but I remember the details of everyday living. Which was really good. I have picture since I came here and I started taking photos. I wish all the days I've been have been here; I wish they could come back to the beginning.*

Narrations of this kind make the temporal aspect of transition(s) illuminating in terms of Zafar's life story and perceptions of his present and future life. The question marks over Zafar's status stymies his belief that so much is achievable in a relatively short space of time. He refers to a state of 'limbo' in waiting 2 years thus far for the legalities relating to this

status shift to British citizen to be clarified and decided. Other narrations highlight how this clashes with his fortitude to move forward and achieve his desired pathways:

> *If it wasn't for my date of birth, I could have stayed one more year in school; one more year in foster care; and one more year here [his flat delivered via the local authority]. One year is not a short time, it is quite a long time. You can do a lot in a year...Because of this and my status I'm like in a depression and stressed. Don't know what's happening. Don't know where I'm going to next.*

It becomes clear that, despite the problems this is causing in the practical sense, this disruption to the temporal order of his transitions to independence clash with his sense of self and attitudes on life. Zafar drew several times on a metaphor for overcoming difficult circumstances by 'looking forward' - a metaphor originating from being on a precarious boat journey near the coast of Turkey and being told to do so. He narrates:' …you have to be curious and look forward and try to achieve something now like, make more friends, make different experience, make difference to other people's life'.

6.3.2. Callie and Jessica: Care fatigue and a desire for 'independence'

Within the life stories of Callie and Jessica, it was emphasised how supported lodgings and lead tenant placements were stopgap measures for them to be able to finish education or seek their own accommodation within the private sector. This contrasts with other life stories that placed emphasis upon felt experiences of family kinship resulting from their long-term foster care placements. It seems to be the case that the expressed need for

'independence' is precipitated by what could be described as *care fatigue,* a desire to leave services and the family dynamic into which they are placed to experience independence. Throughout Callie's life story were narrative episodes expressive of care fatigue, tensions with her birth parents who she wishes to maintain a relationship with and the family who acts as her 'supported lodgers'. The following extract highlights the desire to move on into independent living due to a low degree of felt kinship:

> *I don't really like living here, cos I don't get on with them really. I see her family [her friend's] more than I see my foster family…'Cos I don't really trust people, I don't really get close to people. And I'm going to leave there soon anyway, so there's no point.*

Callie later moves on to detail the tension that exists within the home between her and the woman that has the role as her carer within the supported lodgings. Arguments are arising over notions of independence, in particular over Callie's finances and expenditure on clothes and beauty products. Callie still maintains that she would know how to support herself in the future, and will do so as soon as she has finished education and found permanent employment. However, she also stresses that the quality of the relationship between herself and her carer lead her to undertake the behaviour that is the cause of the tension:

> *Some people when they get stressed yeah go to sleep or go for a walk or eat some food – I go shopping. Seriously like, to help me get out of the house, be in my own world. Every time I go shopping I get shouted at. As soon as I come back I hide things that I buy, just in case she shouts at me. Just to save a lecture, 'cos I don't want to be lectured anymore. Obviously if I was living*

> *with my dad I wouldn't be getting this money. It's kinda like free money, and if they at giving me it, I might as well do what I want. Save when I need to save. But I can do all that in the future.*

As such, Callie's subjective interpretations of notions of what independence entails are derailed by the fractious day-to-day relationship with her carer figure. A sense is gained that Callie is sidestepping any attempt by her carer or support workers, who are at least there figuratively in offering support, to prepare her for independent living. This outlook is cogent with narratives that highlight particular barriers in accepting support that does not comply with Callie's notion of what support should look like within the realms of her 'I can do all that in the future' perspective. However, it seems the support Callie indicates she receives is not sustained and intuitively helping ease her into a transitional move to her own home:

> *I've got 2 social workers. One hasn't seen me since; well since I've lived here she's seen me once. And the other one, she's based around here anyway so she sees me once every 2 weeks or whatever…I'm the type of person who's got a smile on my face, I smile no matter what has happened. So to her I'm always happy. People don't think I'm unhappy at all, 'cos I smile all the time whatever happened or whatever's going on.*

In interpreting Callie's overall narratives around support, she would gain from some assistance in helping her with the impact of re-establishing contact with her birth mother and siblings and reconciling the continued upset regarding separation from her father at age 15. Callie's timeless perspective regarding the future can be driven by this, with the more pressing concerns to her, which run through her life story, being developing her close family

and friendship relations. In this sense, a critical turning point as highlighted by Callie as hindering this recalibration, was her removal from her long-term foster care placement to the supported lodgings setting:

> *That hurt me when I moved from my last placement. 'Cos I knew everything, and they were always there to guide me. When I made my mistakes, they'd guide me the right way. They convinced me to go to college and finish school and stuff…So I stayed down here for another two years. I don't mind. I don't know what I want to do now. And I'm finishing soon and haven't applied for uni…*

In contrast to Callie, Jessica had a series of 8 short-term placements (lasting less than a year) after entering care between the ages of 12 and 13. Within Jessica's life story, her narrations did not imply a significant relationship with either her foster carers or lead tenant carers. This experience had implications for her subjective interpretations of notions of independence, as did her birth mother's and sister's periods of dependency on her once she left care. To Jessica, the sense of an actual timing of her future transitions was steered by a need to take control over her future transitions and life course. As she narrates:

> *I'm definitely trying to create a life - if I can hang in there for myself - that's more positive and eventually have children and, you know, go down the track of the right way.*

Jessica had made the transition from care placements into independent living already, unlike Callie. However, Jessica's narrations of her care transitions, accommodation transitions post-

care and her family relations allow for an understanding of the influence of the negotiation of fraught familial relations upon her outlook whilst she was in Callie's position. Despite this familial negotiation, Jessica's fractious relations with her sister, in particular, seem to have provided her with the recourse to build upon and maintain her sense of developing independence. In relation to having a care history and her sister's drug abuse and difficult post-care transitions, Jessica states: '…at some point you've got to take responsibility for that or draw a line in the same with it to be able to get on with your own life. Otherwise it will consume you, I think'. Jessica's narratives of the present also indicates how difficult it has been to square the need to retain control over how often she sees her family, especially her mother, so to build her life with the desire to have closeness with her family:

> *I've always missed them, and I've always wanted them around. But sometimes you can't always have it like you want it. And if you do, you know, you've got to be a little selfish sometimes. As bad as it is…..it is the hardest thing to admit that you never will [have a bond with family]. It kills ya. And it's even worse when you've got to let it go. Even though you want it so much…Sometimes you've got to know what you will win in life and what you won't.*

It could be said that Callie, too, may also reach this level of mental compromise about her family. However, a key aspect of Jessica's life story was the importance she placed on the organisational culture of Agency 2 (a care advocacy voluntary organisation she became involved with whilst in care) and several constant key workers in foregrounding her desires of following an educational and employment trajectory within the social care area. This input certainly helped steer the 'objective' aspects of Jessica's care and post-care care trajectory

and bring some of stability to her transitions. Interestingly, the subjective interpretations of her negative portrayals of care transitions, and particular lived experiences, were steered towards a desired future that allowed her to 'create a life'. In relation to notions of independence, another interesting facet of Jessica's story was her narratives reflecting upon moving from a residential placement to her lead tenant arrangement as 'positive' as she 'got rid of crazy, psycho children to having my own sort of independence and my own sort of environment to be able to do as I would'. However, this belies the fact that the lead tenant arrangement, and a subsequent two, failed to work out and being unsettled stimulated the final transition from care to private accommodation.

The following chapter will turn analytical attention to care trajectories 4-5 and the associated metaphors derived.

CHAPTER SEVEN - FINDINGS: CARE TRAJECTORIES 4-5

7.1. Care trajectory 4: Transitions as renewal and self-constructing independence

7.1.1. Elliot and Kyle: Care as starting again, space to self-construct independence

In turning attention towards Elliot's life story, his narrations regarding his early childhood and the subsequent movement into and between care placements are pitched towards an understanding of the impact of memories regarding the temporal order of things (and how these can influence a particular trajectory). Elliot's entry into care occurred at age 8 due to issues relating to parental drug misuse. Between the ages of 4 and 8, he was placed into care arrangements – including one kinship, eight foster, and a residential care arrangement - and separated from his older sister and young brother. At age 8, he met one of his future long-term foster carers and serendipity meant he was able to stay on a more permanent basis, alongside his younger brother. To arrive at an understanding of Elliot's life story and the place of his care trajectory, the presence of his long-term foster carers is important, in particular in observing his developing perceptions of the constituents of family life:

> *…I was in and out of care; I was living with different people. I was in this thing called residential – which was sort of a bunch of kids living together with like guardians or whatever – and that was pretty horrible. But I was living in and out of care till I was 8, and finally met Steve. The thing with Steve was meant to be a temporary, on weekends thing. But then, we sort of, I started seeing him as my dad…And we just went from there, from 8 till about now. I was only 17 when they first become my legal guardian, you know like the law things; but before I saw them as my family. So, it was only a formality thing for him and Brendan to be my legal guardians, along with my brother.*

This narrative excerpt extends other narratives regarding the objectified movements between different care placements, and also their variation in types. Whilst this transitional period clearly represented transitions within Elliot's overall care trajectory (because of the recalibration involved in different family displays), during this time his status remained the same. In this instance, this brought emphasis to how the transitional episodes for children moving between care are not solely akin to transitions representing shifts in status (and movement between care placements) - or even that a transition as a unifying concept amongst children within the care system does not embody this. The narrative episode above indicates a change in status occurs because of a transition into his future permanent foster care home as a family member, which Elliot recalls entailed him recognising his carers as parental figures following periods settling into the family dynamic. Here we lay witness to how a transitional episode permeates another and how malleable the relational aspect of a transition(s) can be - or becomes representable to the individual that has encountered those experiences. Elliot suggests a memorable and protracted period of flux between and within care placements in early childhood, this reflection stimulated the narrative about how he was 'finally' settled into a foster home, a family unit that had foundation of permanence to it. In a further narrative episode regarding his interpretations of family he brings his reflections into the present:

> *I still see my parents, like my biological parents. But, you know, they are just my biological parents. I see Brendan and Steve as my family. If that makes sense? My brother, Jake, is most definitely my world.*

The relational aspects of the genesis and evolution of Elliot's foster family unit into the long-term further highlight the notion that transition is multi-faceted. A transition can entail objective movement (or key events and life changes that are experienced and observed) and a discrete movement into a foster family unit exists as a transition. However, the subsequent negotiation of family relations and general family life exist as *transition dynamics* within the process of *transitioning*.

Within Elliot's descriptors of family there remain contradictions in how he portrays the concept of a foster family in his distinguishing between a foster family and the biological family as representing a 'normal family'. Whilst he is able to draw in some depth upon the significance of his long-term foster family unit, his expressions of his overall family trajectory in this sense are contradictory. However, this language could reflect wider discourses regarding the *ideal* family and childhood rather than a judgement call on Elliot's behalf. As a corollary to this, Elliot frequently mentions 'Katie', a former support worker of his whilst in care and now employee for a leading foster care organisation in Victoria. Alongside Katie, Elliot alludes to his relationship with the couple who were to become his guardians in various narrations that express further his interpretations of the constituents of family and interpretations of family life. Upon being fostered by his former long-term carers this mental reorganisation proliferated during earlier childhood and adolescent as a result of relations with his external peer groups:

> *Katie, she was always there as a mother to me…it's just hard. I could not imagine not having her around. I cannot imagine what it will be like without her, cos I just don't want to. She was always the mother figure, and that was great. But, again, living with two guys - two guys that were my dads – is sort of hard. Not on a personal 'Oh my God, they are gay' blah blah. But, what would my friends like think if I told them. Erm, so that took a while to get used to. But, at the end of the day, they always taught me that if they are your real friends it doesn't matter what happens.*

Overall, Elliot's story certainly highlights the relational complexities with regards transitioning into, between and within foster family life into adolescence and beyond. Elliot's also draws on distinctive, explanatory language with regards to entry into care in alluding to a process of beginning a care trajectory that has permanence, despite having a relatively lengthy foster care placement that ended in legal and social permanency. This choice of language could also bring temporality into play, not solely in relation to timing of care entry, but as a concept of experiencing and reflecting upon how a foster family constructs itself as a unit and thus develops over time. For example:

> *When I finally did start care, with Steve and Brendan and Jake, it probably took me two years to realise that they were my family, and my brother, and like all one family. So, ever since it's been great.*

This use of language of 'starting' care is again distinctive, and reflects the nature of temporality regarding care transitions as being timeless and existing as an evolutionary trajectory. This application of language comes into being despite a later development in Elliot's family transitions when his long-term foster carers became his legal guardians, and does not appear to be narrations borne out of trying to bring clarity about the various

significant figures within his life story. Elliot veers between lexes that identifies with his former foster carers as his parental figures or parents in the normative sense – hence, touching on a clear care lineage from early childhood. This contrasts with the life stories of Venice and Alex who vehemently distinguishes their former foster parents as to be their parents and their biological mother or father as having a differing role ascription.

The relational aspects to Elliot's transitions were certainly made apparent within his narrations. These complexities were based upon entry into care in early childhood, the expressed fluxes in movement between different types of placement, contact with biological parents whilst being in care, sometime separation from his siblings, then orientation to a new family that would become a permanent family setting. The support that arose from Elliot's relations with Katie and his guardians allowed for some mediation with the relational complexities alluded to from within his care trajectory and interactions with this biological family. Elliot mentions how Katie, or another support worker, and latterly his guardians, would help him maintain contact with his biological family across his entire care trajectory. This seemingly helped foster his mature outlook regarding his parent's troubles and the reasons surrounding his entry into care, and helped mediate the turbulence experienced as narrated.

From Elliot's narrations it appears that notions of transiency within the temporal order of his life course were left behind, or did not manifest into a phenomenon that was problematic to his transitions (as a consequence of that status shift into becoming a young person whose

foster parents gained legal guardianship). In interrogating the narrations further, it appears that this change in socio-legal status had a greater significance than Elliot suggested above as it has brought stability into the temporal order of things, especially his discrete transitioning into independence out of the family home. The following narrative episode helps underline the resulting pathways being experienced:

> *…out of care, which was technically when I was 17, 18 – now I'm 19, I'm technically out of care – nothing has changed. I still have my family and Bren and Steve are still my dads. The only thing that has changed is that I moved to [a neighbouring district], out of my own choice, to go to uni and start teaching….I go back every weekend pretty much 'cos I have basketball coaching and things like that. But, nothing else changed really…I know there are some cases, like they've been left on the street or whatever. It was never going to happen with Steve and Brendan because they are my parents. I will always have a room with them no matter what.*

Elliot has carved desired trajectories for himself, involving maintaining a lifestyle he deems healthy. Notions of independence are apparent within his story but more couched in terms of a slipstream of acquiring independence following the security that has resulted from his current family life. Elliot narrates how discussions regarding his transition out of the home of his guardians, into independence, never directly surfaced as '…I didn't have a choice. It was always that I was going to have a home with them. So, it never crossed my mind like what happens when I turn 18'. Whilst Elliot may also attribute his independence and successful education trajectory to having the 'support networks', he also alludes to ascribing his own part as a role model in his younger brother's life and needing to make sound decisions for his

sake. In a narrative response regarding considering what may have been the alternate pathway if he had not entered the home of his guardians he surmised:

> *…I could have easily turned to drugs and violence, dropped out of school, and lived on the streets…I would have been a normal sort of foster kid in that sense…I always felt it wasn't right for my brother. A lot of it was for my brother.*

The life story of Kyle, which also fell within trajectory 4, echoed Elliot's narratives regarding a sense of temporal transience. The structural nature of Kyle's life story differed, however, in terms of the particularities of his care and transitions and nuances of his care trajectory in relation to familial relations. Kyle entered the care system at age 7 and remained in a foster care placement until at some point between the ages of 11 and 12 when he returned to the care of his birth mother. Kyle experienced one foster care transition into a family home of people he did not know previously, in his narrations he portrays how he perceived this transition as a child and the nature of the impact it had:

> *Well, I was taken to court. And then taken out of court and into a new house, and I had no idea what was going on. I remember going into the place and watching Blue Healers, and I used to love watching that show…So, it was all a big blur to me. I had no idea what was going on. I got up the next morning and got driven to my school. So, yeah, everything was normal…I was thinking what's happening here? What's going on? About a month later I was trying on a new uniform, to see what my size was, and I'm thinking I'm leaving my school and leaving all my friends. I was quite upset by that.*

Kyle soon re-enters care after spending time in his mother's home, due to the prominence of her alcoholism, and transitions into the home of his Godmother who later becomes his foster mother. Although Kyle transitions into the home of someone who has been a close feature in his life, and within close distance to his mother who he was able to visit frequently, he narrates how the death of his father at age 13 became a turning point in the relative stability this initial transition may have afforded him.

Preceding his father's death, Kyle narrates how there were periods of time when he was not allowed to see his mother, then was granted monthly-supervised access, and at other times would absconder to her home unaccompanied. Kyle draws parallels between his aggressive behaviour at his new primary school and incidences of domestic violence – 'there was a lot of violence growing up' – and the periods of uncertainty in which his parents addictions would surface, his father presence was transient, or meetings with his mother would be emotionally challenging for both of them. In this sense, external support concerning these relations appears absent seemingly due to the 'kinship care' type of care arrangement. Any support came within the school context and channelled towards anger management and counselling Kyle to mitigate against his challenging behaviour within the classroom. Kyle's transitions during this time involving a period of flux, whereby his external relations that were already present came to represent a system of care itself, which seemingly brought some stability back to the fray:

I was allowed to move back to mum's. Then I moved back to mum's and it was great – very happy. Then, the day after my birthday mum was back on the drink again and I rang up my Godmother, Philippa. I said, mum's on the drink again, what do I do?...She came to pick me up, and then[the State Department] found out about it and said you are not to live there [his Godmother's] anymore again. And then went back to the courts and I said to them I didn't want to go. They looked at permanent care in […town extracted] and I said I don't want to go there, why can't I live with my Godmother? This was a big burden on her and she had no idea about it…Philippa ended up accepting me with open arms…The Department of Education said that through all the movement and that it could have affected my schooling, so it's best to do Grade 6 again, make friends and go to high school with them. So I made friends again, and friends with friends that I was already friends with.

It appears, therefore, the temporal transience in Kyle's life story – regarding the early entry into care and transitions into a few different family environs – was stabilised in some sense due to the familiarity he had with the relations around him and assistance with his education experiences due to his early turbulence within school. Following Kyle's transition into the home of his Godmother (who became his foster carer) and high school he narrates how his aggressive outbursts become problematic within the backdrop of his home life in which he was defying sanctions placed on how often he could visit his biological mother. This situation became a battle with the foster care agency involved in his placement: 'They knew what was going on, but got to the stage where no-one could stop me'. He moves on to narrate how these battles with authority figures dissipated following a programme of counselling managed through school, playing sports and becoming involving in sport committees and leadership programmes. Although the subsequent death of his father represented the 'hardest thing I've ever been through', he reached a point of acceptance, he narrates, and it

was a critical turning point in integrating into his birth family again as they were able to offer the support he needed.

Kyle was able to trace the transitional moments that sat within his care trajectory or were external to this with some clarity and added the points in the temporal order, as narrated, when 'everything started going back up again' or when 'it was great'. One gains the sense that his experiences of transitions as he narrates them - the linearity, a relatively stable care trajectory with few placements, being welcomed in the home of his Godmother, the support provided – did not relate strongly to the trajectories he later experienced. There is a disjuncture between his care trajectory and his later transitional experiences despite his early transitions being relatively stable. Clearly, the emotional impact of events occurring within his birth family came to the fore. Whilst he was able to draw on the support of close relations during his childhood transitions, the way in which he was reconciling these difficulties in his teen years were potentially going to destabilise his future. Kyle surmises that he was in a peer group, within which pre-legal drinking of alcohol and an antagonistic attitude towards girls was normalised. His early anger management issues, as identified within the education system, were re-surfacing and he detached himself away from previous hobbies and interests. Kyle states this orientation towards a pathway he identified as being destructive took him into the present to begin to turn around:

> *Just alcohol was becoming a big problem for me. Then it made me think, that not only was I drinking and having a good time, but while I was having a good time I was hurting the people around me. So that changed me a lot.*

> *The girlfriend I'm with now, I've been with her for just over a year and a half. Yeah, she's pulled me in a lot…I'm definitely a different person…Everything's great.*

From his narrations within his life story, he is able to empathise with his parent's addictions and does not resort to a language of blame or anger towards them. His transitions into 'adulthood' clearly represent a circular process, rather than transitions towards independence representing turnarounds following critical turning points in a linear sequence of events. Kyle's life story and narrations of his transitions are epitomised through many discrete familial transitions in which status and role reorganisations occurred. For instance, in relation to the impact of his mother's disability on the family and his care and the protective role and closeness he expresses towards his mother regardless of his journey in care, which was heavily disruptive to him on various levels. The personal impact of his experiences of transitions veered back and forth - was both progressive and regressive - but he was fortunately able to steer his future for his own benefit through committing to his family displays and helping his mother.

In a further narrative, he traces his experiences and brings them into the future in ruminating on working with children and young people. He refers to having 'opening up a chapter', a new phase in his life, as a metaphor for transcending his past:

> *I've thought about it, and I thought, if I did it, it would be too related to myself maybe. I don't know how to explain it. The way I look at it now is that I've opened up a chapter in my life, and I've moved on from all that. And I*

feel if I went back to it, I'd be flashbacking it and seeing it again…Serving drunks is bad enough! {laughter}

Kyle's understanding of independence into adulthood is clearly tied towards a *do the right thing* ethos – 'try your best and get over it' – and to capitalise on the close relations around him who he deems to be caring. At age 18, he moved into the home of his mother and remains in close contact with both of his former foster carers (including his Godmother). Although he resists terms that suggest he is his mother's carer, he clearly offers a great deal to support to her and this is engraining a forward thinking mentality in which he has an opportunity to be at home again and 'move on', in ways that are best for his mother and himself. This attitude is expressed in a narration below:

I can't say I've had a bad life, I say I've had an experience really. I don't think anything in my life's been bad and I don't regret anything. I'm doing fine…A bad life's when you look at the poor kids in South Africa or Ethiopia…But, yeah, I had a roof over my head. I was looked after and everything like that. So, it was just a learning experience and I look at it now that when I have my kids I will know what to do…

7.1.2. Eva: Care transitions framing meta-narratives regarding independence

The final transition biography that falls within this trajectory is that of Eva. In common with Elliot and Kyle, Eva spent a period of around 4-5 years within the care system before transitioning to a long-term foster care arrangement. Eva could not place a figure on the number of placements she had in residential settings, but she made several transitions 'back and forth really from children's homes to children's homes' over a period of 5 years

alongside her sister. Eva's association with the care system, however, came sooner as her mother was under the radar of services due to illicit drug use whilst pregnant and association with the legal system, during which time her older sister was born in prison. Before the age of 5, Eva spent periods of time experiencing movement between the respective homes of her biological mother and father.

It was from her mother's home that Eva made her first transition into care as '…she was struggling, getting into trouble, on drugs.' Generally, Eva portrayed her care trajectory and her associated pathways into independence with the necessary clarity. However, the presentations of her narratives were quite ordered as she prosaically gave an overview of what would come to be analysed as her key transitions. As such, her main focus was the objectified nature of the movements she made and the key actors across her life story. This made tracing her interpretations and representations of her transitions relatively difficult. Below is an excerpt of this narrative genesis within her life story:

> *And then erm, when I was 10, me and my sister got separated, and went into foster care. And since being in foster care, with [Agency 1], I had therapy 3 times a week – intense therapy. I was only at school half a day, because like school wouldn't' have me for the full day cos I had anger management problems and stuff…when I stayed with my foster carer and just got loads of support. When I was 16, I became independent, and went into a hostel. Form that hostel,* I *went into a scheme that social services run…and they give you a flat or a house…So, I stayed there for about a year, and then, cos I was coming on 18, I had to go and fill in me forms for a council property and then about a month later I got offered my first flat.*

Eva's approach to narrating her life story seems to derive from her involvement in organisations in which she has been interviewed about her experiences and presented at conferences. This developed into type of narratology that seemed disconnected unlike how Kyle and Elliot narrated their stories; as such, Eva was not overly reflective about her experiences that lay within her care trajectory. In saying this, Eva was able to position herself more directly within the wider realm of experience regarding the care system and within which looked-after children are placed. Therefore, *meta-narratives* could be extrapolated to derive meanings regarding transitions towards adult independence of young people within the care system and what is required upon leaving care in relation to support mechanisms. For example, Eva draws on an interview she took part in for an organisation's newsletter whereby 'basically me and my sister talked about what it was like growing up in care and what could be changed now'. She moves on to a narrative to explain how she and her sister aimed to convey to potential foster carers that they should avoid cross-comparisons involving young people in care with those experiencing standardised pathways that young people who do not fall within the care system appear to make. She helped convey that carers should not:

> *…look at a 12-year-old child who has been in care and judge them and to then look at another child age 12 who has had a normal life and expect that child to be on the same wavelength as that one. 'Cos that's what they do, you know, they say oh at 12 you should be doing this; you should be in full-time school. But it's I'm not a normal 12-year-old because of what I've been through before my time.*

This usefully conveys the sense that, to Eva, the transitional pathways that are made amongst children and young people in care are constructed as not existing within a *normal* sphere of experience and are set aside, or *de-normalised.* Eva draws on further meta-narratives of this kind to explore her opinion on care transitions and associated pathways and, in doing, traces how experiences of care relates to future pathways from her own perspective:

> *It's still the same because people look at you, oh you should be doing this at this age, and you should be this at that age. And you know, that's why I don't plan anything. I don't look too far into the future 'cos there's always something that comes along. So, from being in care, you can never say oh yeah, one day. [Or that] I will be in that school for another year, 'cos things might change just like that and you have to like move somewhere else.*

In comparison to Elliot and Kyle, at age 16 Eva made the transition from her long-term foster care placement before reaching the socio-legal age marking adult status. This relatively early transition, compared to most of the sample and amongst those that had a long-term foster placement, seemingly stimulated this temporal dislocation between experiences and perspectives on the future. This state was expressed in terms of slips into meta-narratives, amid a relative lack of direct narratives of personal experience. Further into her life story, Eva reflects upon the relational aspect of transitions from care into independence and again moves into narratives that appear to blend in the common dialogue she has been associated with. In making reference to important turns in her family trajectory she refers to re-establishing her relationship with her father in terms of presenting her 'support system' within her life story. In an alternate narrative, she discusses the nature of her placement and

the reasons why she became separated within the care system from her sister. Although she slips into descriptors of experience that reflects professional language with reference again to 'support systems', 'achieving goals' and 'meeting needs', there is a turn in the narrative episode in which she draws directly on a reflection of her positive experiences of foster care:

> *…We both had different needs. Whereas my sister, she was more able to talk about things and cry and stuff. Whereas I wouldn't, I'd hold it all in and just then explode, at the wrong times…She just went to a normal local authority foster placement, but my foster placement was specialised. So that was quite good. Hmm. I think 'cos of the support I had, I think that's what made me more stable. I think if they took me away and put me in a normal foster placement, without the proper support that I needed, I think I wouldn't be who I am now to be fair. So I can give them [social services] thumbs up for that. All the rest – youse were crap! {laughter}.*

When prompted to give more detail about the foster care arrangement Eva transitioned from at age 16, her relationship with her carer was explored alongside an interesting narrative concerning her perceptions on independence. At an early point in her placement, it transpired that the funding may not be sustained, due to the fact that Eva was not supposed to be placed with other looked-after children and so she had to be 'double-funded' because her carer has space for more than one child. Eva narrates that her carer's commitment underlined her importance in the family unit. Interestingly, within the direct explorations of her care transitions and perceptions of them, it appears to be the case that she alluded to two differing streams within one single care trajectory from age 5 to 16. She suggests a state of two sets of experiences, which is understandable given the age differentials and as she entered a long-term care placement from previous experiences of

flux between different residential homes. However, this notion raised differs from other life stories in the sense that those who entered a long-term placement pre- and post-adolescence tend to couch their narrations of transition into long-term foster homes in terms of good fortune and luck. To Eva, it was a stark distinction between having the support framework within the care setting, and previously not:

> *…if they had given us that support, then we would have been fine…I think we were worse off at 10 going into foster placements then we were when we were 5. Maybe if were given the support then it would have been an easier ride for us. But we weren't given no therapy, no support, nothing…I just wish we had support, so we wouldn't have ended up {trails off}…'cos I ended up going to prison [at 14] and stuff like that, for like fighting and being, being aggressive. But maybe if they controlled that from when I was younger…*

Despite being able to stay in the home of her long-term foster carer, Eva desired to break away from the family unit to explore her growing sense of independence – '…when I was 16, I though oh yeah I'm a big woman just let me move out {laughs}'. Though it seems this narrative was a jovial take on events, the experiences Eva was having previously steered her into a trajectory of confusing her associated unease and impatience for being independent or ready for independence. Clearly, in the wider context, this *clean break* and subsequent transition into independent living does not occur amongst the majority, even amongst young people in the sample and leaving care generally. Eva surmises that she entered a state of independence prematurely due to pervasive loneliness when she was living independently and one her own. She explains how she had many peers around that time who were destructive, emotionally and physically within her home, and that she spent time with them

to stave off the loneliness. Between the ages of 18 and 19, further support was required and sought in order to reconcile that acknowledged premature transition into independent living.

7.2. Care trajectory 5: Transformative transitions and expressions of independence as status change

A further six of the sample transitioned out of care from a long-term foster placement, however, they entered that family unit as a teenager and left the home close to or beyond cessation of any care order (trajectory 5). These participants first entered care between the ages of 2 and 7, and transitioned into the long-term foster care home they later exited from between the ages of 13 to 16. Of the four transitions biographies found within trajectory 5, experiences of motherhood will be explored in relation to their care trajectory, transitional experiences, and notions of independence, as they all became mothers at various points in time. Blake and Tori have also transitioned from a long-term foster care placement, though Tori had two long-term foster placements across her overall care trajectory.

7.2.1. Blake and Tori: Care as transforming past and relational ideals shaping independence

Blake entered the care system at age 6, and spent around 7 years in five different placements before transitioning to a long-term foster care arrangement at age 13. Blake also spent a short period with each of his biological parents in his ninth year. Blake commenced

his life story with an overview of his key transitions into and between care placements. In doing so, he was able to outline the instrumental aspects of these transitions (relating to timing, placement types, and the socio-legal backdrop) and interpretations of events from memory. In describing his experience of his first care placement, a residential unit, he stated: '…that was pretty stable compared to what it was later on. It was very turbulent later on…I was there for a year or two. I was quite happy there'. Upon reading his life story, it became apparent that a sense of insecurity he conveys was of particular salience in understanding the dynamic quality of his transitions. The 'turbulence' Blake refers to reflect the unease experienced when he transitioned to a family unit with 'adoptive parents' [N.B. ambiguity as to whether they were potential adoptive parents or legally became his adoptive parents]. He narrates around the couple's lack of adequate support for his 'behavioural issues' with regards to the degree of meaningful quality to his time with them:

> *Unfortunately, for me, they were hardcore Christians – but not Christian! – and thought they could sort me out with the power of God and all that sort of crap…They originally thought I had ADHD. But, in the end, it was really just poor environment and things like that, rather than actual something wrong with me…I was there for 6 month, and then they couldn't handle me, 'cos of my behavioural issues, and they kept thinking it was something that they could sort using remedial techniques, like Chiropractors and crap like that. They were really horrible, mean and terrible…I still envisage ringing them up one day and giving them a piece of my mind.*

An issue that arose in relation to the perceived quality of placements transitioned between was the degree to which there was support provided for existing identified needs, particularly as this overtly supportive environment would foster a sense of security to Blake,

as he now narrates. Blake's initial placement was a residential unit setting within which key workers remained overall constant, from what he can recall. His early time in care only represented, to him, a period of relative stability as subsequent placements in residential units, between the ages of 9 and 14, were described as unstable due to the number of residential workers and the frequency in changeover. Consequently, Blake surmised that '…there was no structure in place to help me with my problems. [Unit workers] didn't really care about their job, they were just there'. Blake describes a period of flux in which he was awaiting a more permanent placement: '…it was very difficult because I had all these behavioural issues, and because I was an older child, and because I was male…no-one would really take me on'. Due to the refusal of Blake's birth parents to allow him to be legally adopted, a foster care placement was found when he was 13:

> *Eventually when I was about 13 or 14 - I didn't get adopted because my parents were against being adopted, they still wanted like guardianship over me – so, in a very uncommon case I was told, I was sort of adopted but still in government care….I lived with [single foster carer] from 13 and I was 18 when I moved out. When I moved in with her she sorted me out, got my s**t into gear, and like got me the proper help that I needed. So I got a lot settled down, and it helped me to become who I am today I reckon.*

This perception that long-term foster carers 'helped me to become who I am today' was commonly held one amongst young people whose transitional experiences fall within trajectory 5. This suggests the secure notions of independence facilitating status change are assisted directly by relations with foster carers. Blake expresses that his relationship with his long-term foster carer provided the necessary foundation from which his various mental and

physical health difficulties were to be addressed, and which he explained were largely unmet during his preceding time in care.

Whilst this stability experienced in his last placement supported Blake in working alongside health practitioners, his relations with senior care practitioners remained fractious, and he largely engaged with them for procedural reasons: 'They would give me something like this {shows governmental form}...I'd get this massive sheet of just fluff, and I'll be 'yes, it's ok'.' Negative perspectives of mainstream care services was heightened recently when it was discovered that the State department were not facilitative with regards to a possible kinship placement and, in relation to this, he 'didn't know what was going on behind the scenes'. However, he also concludes that 'they've changed a lot now. So, grandparents and family members have a lot sort of more rights if a child is in care or whatever'.

In all, Blake's sense of independence post-care seemingly developed from this dislocation from mainstream care services – 'So once you are 21 now, you are on your own. Good luck. Have a good life. So it's all that sort of fluff I was given. Crap they wrote'. However, the maintenance of his relationship with his foster mother helped, this relationship seemingly also allowed for a developed maturity relating to perspectives on family life and his ability to reach reconciliation with his biological parents and later build a relationship with his half-siblings.

In all, there was a clear transitional lineage to Blake's story and the narrated association with these experiences and, as such, the portrayal of his sense of self was clear and not conflicting. Although Blake articulated the failures involving his care contexts in addressing his health and wellbeing, this was embedded in his portrayal of himself as a child with challenging behavioural and anger management problems. In saying that, he narrates how there came a turning point in his care trajectory when he transitioned to the home of his long-term foster carer. Moreover, his narration was crafted closely to the aims of the study in that his main focus was on the experiences surrounding his care transitions, however, his story also delved into family life during his care trajectory (and when he re-entered home of his biological father):

> *[My] father didn't know how to raise me; this person Carole [step-mother] was a real nutcase, she was really strict…No-one really cared, got thrown around a lot in care. Just no-one really took an interest in me until Terri took hold of me when I was 13. Which was really lucky for me, I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for her.*

Blake generally placed less emphasis on his biological family, but seemingly, this is of a result of his consistently close ties with his long-term foster carer and possibly narrating within the bounds of the research project on foster care transitions also. However, Blake could be provide blasé and witty sound bites which hinted at his negative experiences, rather than dwelling on them. For example, in relation to limited contact with his biological father: 'Legally, I could see him once a week…it was [initially monitored]…but then after a while they found that my father wasn't going to kidnap me and take me away'. Interestingly, Blake

highlights his achievements at school, further/higher education and employment; however, this is attributed in the main to his relationship with his long-term foster carer - and also her support in helping him address his problems through psychotherapeutic service. In essence she was 'like a parent. You know, just there'.

Blake's experience of family life took various twist and turns; the close contact with his long-term foster carer and foster sisters has endured (one of whom is 'Imogen' in the study). In discussing his experiences of school and education generally, he restates the lack of support with his experiences from within the care system across his care trajectory. He pinpoints two key figures within his primary and high school that helped to mentor him through his difficulties within care:

> *…if I had a problem, I would go to them and talk to them like a counsellor. And I didn't like talking to people when I was young. It was very awkward. But, as I got older it really helped to have someone to talk through my frustrations and everything. In the Unit [residential care] they were in short supply; very hard to talk to somebody if they are not there. So.*

In terms of notions of independence, this seems to be tied towards achieving his educational goals and the focus upon preparing for his forthcoming marriage. As narrated by Blake, his sense of independence comes from the stability he experienced in the latter part of his care trajectory and the freedom from having his concerns addressed. Blake relays how he was able to achieve his goals at school and follow through his educational trajectory into

part-time university study. His first transitional experiences into independent living were met by moving in with people he deemed inappropriate, this experience did not destabilise him significantly.

Tori's care trajectory also entailed transitions into care in early childhood and into a long-term care placement later on into adolescence, which she was to transition from into independent living. However, Tori's care trajectory is not atypical compared to the rest of the sample that falls into trajectory 5, as she entered another long-term foster care placement in early childhood at age 2 –and-a-half, this broke down when she turned 13. As Tori entered care as a toddler, her early memories of this transition are understandably absent. However, reaching clarity regarding events around this transition is very significant to her into the present. Communication with her paternal grandmother has allowed her to gather some information regarding her early family life and formative transitions into care. A care order was granted when her parents separated and incidences of maternal neglect and physical abuse surfaced. Tori has information with regards to Police intervention and an early court case resulting from discovery of abuse of a sexual nature within an early foster care placement. Tori underlines the importance of gaining access to her records, a process she has fruitlessly been trying to manage:

> *I have to write a letter to ask to see my records, and then they will have to go through the whole records to pick out bits that I'm not meant to see. And then, I hope to see them. But this has been a working progress for at least since I was 18. I'm now 24. Yeah, at the age of 18 you have right to see your document. You've reached adult life. It's a way of understanding what*

happened, that I can lay to rest, as I've heard different stories. For peace of mind really…Growing up in care for anyone is that the mind always plays the 'why'? And facts, we try to seek them out.

The significance into the present of an inability to be able to uncover and interpret lived experiences in early childhood is highlighted through Tori's narration above. In hearing 'different stories' about her past experiences she has an overwhelming sense that she knows only part of her life. Although this sense has not manifested from a mournful 'why' to being a prominent aspect of her life story as lived. Across later narrations, she links her difficulties in retrieving her records to a fraying of trust with people associated with care services (with particular reference to local authorities), for example:

I only have [respect] for the people that have been there, that I still talk to. I choose who to have in my life, as I always get hurt and I'm not willing to let my heart get broken over again, for them to only promise that won't happen. Well, people come and go, and only a few that have helped me and understand me are the people that are still in my life.

In refocussing on Tori's past lived experiences, her narrations regarding her long-term foster carers point to the importance of transitioning to a more permanent setting for a child's trajectories if pervasive trauma has been experienced. Her narrations of this 10-year-period also highlighted the relational dynamics within a foster care home, and how this was experienced this during adolescence. Tori mentions, in relation to recollections of her transition into her foster care placement at age 3, that she was termed a 'special child', although it was 'called something else' in professional social work parlance. A concern that

resulted from her previous trauma meant Tori's foster care placement was managed through a private foster agency specialising in therapeutic approaches. In essence, Tori recalls '10 wonderful years there' in the home of her foster parents that she still refers to as 'mum and dad' and narrates about many memories of her first meeting with them at their home, building relationships with their adopted child and birth child, and family holidays. Tori's reflections on this foster care home clearly suggest she was experiencing the relational qualities to helping to mediate Tori's difficult early years. As in Tori's words there is 'so much I could say about this home…We have a strong relationship'.

The analysis refocussed to derive the moments in Tori's life around adolescence that were to have the possibility of derailing her. Tori narrates how a poor decision by a social worker, which facilitated contact between herself and her biological father and grandmother (despite previous recommendations that this should not occur before she left care), led to a negatively significant turn of events in her teenage life. Within her narratives of this time, Tori indicated that the relational dynamics she was negotiating as a teenager proved destabilising during transitional movement towards her late teens. Despite her experienced contentment within her foster home, the dynamics of her relations involving her foster parents, her biological father (in the context of inappropriate management of this shift in familial transitions), and peer relations represented a disjuncture between the positive aspect of her care trajectory and her developing sense of self given her past experiences.

Tori began engaging in risky behaviour with her peers involving underage sex, smoking and drug abuse. These events intensified over a period of a year until reaching a point of being sat in an office of another private foster care agency, as 'I was to be moved on'. This descriptive phrase represented a poignant extract from a narrative highlighting the change in Tori's care trajectory from a positive family environment for the majority of the 10 years to re-entry into the care system. This narrative excerpt encapsulates the abrupt movement from a placement, and expressions around that amongst care-experienced young people reflect a sense of 'being pushed through the system' to the next arrangement. Tori's narrative also reflects a state of regressive transitions, within which the other side of the coin would involve those children who made various discrete transitions and developed relational agency in experiencing a smooth family trajectory into a long-term placement. Instead, in leaving a long-term placement for another care arrangement, Tori's transitions worked in reverse in the sense that there was no phasing out period, no discrete transitions to help her reconcile and re-interpret notions of family and security. Indeed, within Tori's narrations around the events that built up to her transitioning to another foster care placement, she suggests a lack of space to grieve for her loss of the parental support and family life she experienced. This grief has been internalised to a point she reflects that she:

> *…blames herself, and my social worker for introducing my family at a young age against advice. At a time I was happy to not know about anything else I wasn't able to cope with due to the frame of mind I was in. It was just too much for someone my age.*

Tori also mentions a regret that her foster parents did not 'try a bit harder to control me', but returns to 'blaming herself' for the placement breaking down and her transition into another: 'I was uncontrollable; they couldn't cope with my outbursts. If I could change the past, this would be one part of it. I suppose they thought it would be a good idea for me'. Tori's narratives continue to underline the degree of importance this dislocation in her care trajectory was to her future sense of self.

> *…it's part of my life I wish never happened. And then I think that after I got moved I wouldn't have had such a hell of a life. Because it just got worse for me, not better…*

Tori's narrative above highlights a faith that her care transitions would represent a turning point in which things got 'better' and should not be regressive, but transcending. Tori's narratives below suggest the impact of reintroduction of her biological family into her life had on her sense of self as reflected in her behaviour patterns:

> *…it's hard to explain. It was a mixture of both hurt and betrayal. Why couldn't I live with other family members? Why was I taken into care…? I played up at school. Was hanging out late at night. Still violent and aggressive to anyone. Didn't have respect for anyone, let alone my body. Doing things that I shouldn't of really. But, I was never in trouble with the law, though.*

Though Tori places much emphasis on her behaviour around this time, her narratives also suggest these to be reflective of the regressive transitions she was making within her care trajectory into placements in which she again becomes a *child in care* who had to re-

integrate into a family unit that would work for her. Tori transitioned to a further three foster care placements between the ages of 13 and 15. Tori's narratives suggest that there was difficulty in arranging for a suitable foster care home and at some point between the second and third placement she was informed about an arranged residential placement, which she had to argue, was not suitable. This period of flux was intensified by her forthcoming GCSE exams as remaining in education was important to Tori, at some point she transitioned to her grandmother's home for a short period.

Tori's narratives about this time suggest that she did not anticipate a permanent placement, but was still trying to protect herself from further movement into another home that was not suitable enough to bring order to her pathways. Experiencing a short-term placement in which she mentions she was neglected by the carer accumulated in a physical assault that led to an emergency foster care placement just before her 16th birthday, this was to become her home until legally leaving the care system at age 18. Tori reaffirms the notions that 'things could only get worse', suggesting her interpretations of her future life were remaining consistent, although she was trying to exert agency in protecting against undesired pathways. However, her attempts at this were thwarted by the fluxes in her transitions up until independence. Tori's self-harming behaviours were intensifying during this period, and she was stuck in this temporal state of regression amid the need to progress and transition forward. In other words, she was caught between notions of needing relational agency to assist her in building her independence, and in the absence of this, she was requiring a lengthier period to work towards that independence.

During the two years before transitioning to the status of care leaver and independent living, the relationship she had with her foster parents was allowing for a reprieving time lapse towards building notions of independence:

> *I did better in a family home, rather than with a single parent, and it took them time to realise that…I was calming down and having good come out of me. But, I was still self-harming myself whenever I got angry [with] my foster parent, Jean. We had a deep conversation and realised that it was the fact that I need a family to keep me stable, due to the loss of my mother's love…I was showing them respect, then they gave it back to me, and this why we got on.*

From Tori's story, it unravels that a period of disjuncture between two long-term foster care placements represents the importance of fixed notions of family status (or dynamics of around relatedness) to understand the lived significance of transitional fluxes amid a variety of care types from short to long-term, and back again. In transitioning to independence (despite doing so from a long-term and relationally appropriate placement) the status change from child in care and 'care leaver' had added salience and was experienced as precarious by Tori. A change in status of this nature needs to be bounded by support mechanisms that young people identify as having worth. In supporting transitions from care the whole care trajectory needs to be understood and also form the foundation of any future placements or support pertaining to transitions.

Tori's story is a prime example of understanding the place of status change in terms of its fluidity and intricacies. However, status change is only one aspect of the evolutionary

outcome of transition(s) and should not be the unit of focus. How the young person negotiating independence interprets this status change is crucial. Moreover, also salient is the perception of their notions of viable support in performing this transition(s) and the transition events as experienced and reinterpreted by the young person. For instance, Tori received a legal compensatory 'pay out' due to her early experiences of childhood trauma resulting from harm brought about by her stepmother and foster parents. Tori quickly used up this money during fractious periods of living alone with other care leavers who she mentioned abused her trust. Tori is want to mention that 'I didn't have anyone to support me' and her transition biography suggests that a lack of support framework previous to, and following, her transitions as a care leaver made these events more difficult to endure and transcend.

Despite narrations suggesting a lack of trust in local authority services, it appears Tori tried to establish relations with post-care teams in order to receive support in helping her to stabilise her home life and achieve her educational aims. In recalling how she remained unassisted, she narrates:

> *I didn't really have support through my care life, let alone after care. I suppose I got forgotten. The kind of, oh well, she will get through on her own, got more important things to deal with. As one social worker said to me: 'You're just a piece of paper'. That is, a contract.*

Events pertaining to Tori's precarious post-care transitions indicate the degree to which a transition understood in terms of an *objective* change in status is insufficient in supporting

post-care sense of independence, as are understandings of stability wedded solely to long-term placements. The quality of support relations and interpretation of events surrounding a transition(s) held significance to Tori's post-care trajectories. Tori's notions of independence derive from this precariousness, her desire to experience an education and travel gave her the gumption to work through this period even though she transitioned into a state of what can be termed default independence.

7.2.2. Imogen and Charlotte: Motherhood as transformational transitions and inter-generational reconciliation

The transition biographies of participants that fall within trajectories 4 and 5 induced interesting points of reflection regarding notions of relatedness and family displays in a foster care context denoting relational agency. Relational aspects to transition are brought strongly to the fore in transition biographies within these trajectories across narrations evoking differing family-type roles. For instance, the participants' narrated sense of relatedness with long-term and short-term foster carers and siblings, biological family members, support workers within are agencies, and peers. Whilst notions of independence link to the participants' individuality, the transitional metaphors derived from care trajectories predispose an interpreted sense of relational agency that shows similarities about held notions of ascribed family role and relational agency. In analysing the remaining life stories that fall within trajectory 5, the place of motherhood in this relational interplay will be derived in terms of the interface of the 'transition' dynamic. Charlotte, Imogen and Emma all entered their long-term foster care placement at the age of 13, whilst Bronwyn entered at age 15. Emma transitioned from care at age 16 during her pregnancy. By the time

of transitioning from foster care, Bronwyn's two children had both died in house accidents whilst they were in their respective foster care settings. Charlotte and Imogen both had children in their 20s, once they had transitioned from the care system.

Charlotte and Imogen experienced similar early care transitions within their overall care trajectory. Both separated from their birth mothers and entered foster care at age 7, they also had several foster care placements up until being adopted. Later, their respective adoptions broke down at the age of 12 and they re-entered care. During this period in care, between the ages of 12 and 13, Imogen does not recall clearly which care arrangement she was in, and Charlotte was placed in two foster care arrangements that she frequently absconded from. Both Charlotte and Imogen transitioned to their long-term foster care family unit at age 13; Imogen remained until her early 20s, whilst Charlotte left the home at age 17. However, the relational foundation within which their transitions were performed differed qualitatively. Whilst Imogen was able to have a period of integration into her long-term foster care home, undisrupted by conflict with external relations, Charlotte highlighted the tensions from within her birth family that permeated her care trajectory.

Imogen's transition biography shows a clear lineage between her transition into her long-term foster care placement and narrated sense of mental reconciliation about her experiences. At the heart of this mental reconciliation of her transitional experiences was the relationship with her mother figure, the long-term foster carer who also fostered Blake in the study. Imogen's narrations certainly indicate an idea of transcendence from this

moment on, in indicating this relational process through which she moved beyond her early experiences of losing her mother and transitional fluxes between the childhood home, family members and care. In essence, there is a contradiction in her narratives on held notions of this transitional transcendence within her care trajectory. This contradiction exists between a belief that a great deal of her childhood is not retained in memory due to trauma, and the crystal clear articulation of the process of transitioning from her past childhood social status and the transitions involved in building a bond with her long-term foster carer. In Imogen's words:

> *I'm the cream of the crop to speak to in our family! 'Cos I've had, well, from good to crap, from crap to crapper, to brilliant. I've kinda had the whole lot. But a lot of it, especially early childhood is - sort of up until about 12 - there's a lot of it I can't remember. Mainly from trauma…Now I'm now starting to remember, but it's all starting to piece together and fall into line a little bit.*

The following narrative episode attempts to highlight the turns in her narratives tracing past transitions. This excerpt relates to how she processed her transitions as a child as an exemplar of many narratives that highlight the influence of her long-term foster carer in her experiences of care transitions as being transformative (and stimulating later notions of independence cogent with other young people within this trajectory):

> *… I was placed in a foster family when I was 11 and a half, adoption was all set to go through, all set to happen, was going to be finalised the following week – then they changed their mind. And at this stage I was 12, so I had full recognition of what was going on. I just went alright; because I was already dealing with all those feelings of well, you know, I'm not loved, I'm not*

wanted, nobody wants me…I went through that whole stage of yes somebody wants me, somebody loves me, and somebody accepts me, and now all of a sudden it's not gonna happen….

So then Terri came along, my mum, and I moved in with her when I was 13. And I've literally been with her ever since – and I'm now 29…. She said that I had very big attachment issues when I first came with her. For the first 8 months she had to constantly remind me that no I am staying here because I kept asking her 'when am I going to my next family?

However, in the course of the telling of her life story, Imogen does reflect that her lack of memory of her early childhood is apparent more towards her pre-care years, understandably as this occurred before the age of 7, but also because she is just starting to be 'ready' to access her care records to unearth more detail. To Imogen, it seems her integration into her long-term foster home brought stability to her transitions into independence and transformed her trajectories to the extent that the temporal aspect is more pronounced later on into adulthood. As such, aspects of temporality relating to Imogen's transitional trajectory are interesting in the sense that they are more pronounced into the present, in her current frame of past ruminating about her events within her childhood. This significance is placed in context of being reflective at the time of meeting about whether she should relay her past to her children now they have reached a certain age. This preoccupation is expressed at certain points throughout her story, but is more pronounced here in relation to her demarcation of the past with her current independent status as a mother:

> *I've got my own children and my own life…There may be a time when I tell them, I may not tell them. As mum said, it's up to me. It's my decision. My fear is, if I let them know, that it's all gonna come back. I don't want to have to deal with it all again.*

In telling her life story, Imogen suggested she begun this process to 'piece together' transitional events in how she weaved back and forth and, furthermore, reflected on possible linkages between her present self (including status as a mother and her employed role working with early years children) and her past self. The experience of care transitions as transcendence is evident, even more so seemingly as the process of the life story construction evoked certain thoughts about her trajectories that she had not reflected upon deeply before. This is exampled within a narrative about how she came about choosing her educational and employment trajectories – 'I've always wanted to work with children. And it wasn't till reflecting then that I thought, where did that come from? It's all kind of clicked into place'. Further to this present weaving of the past, her narrations continually brought back to her reflections of her independence in underlining her status as a mother in relation to her experiences:

> *She [her foster mother] didn't think I'll probably ever be able to make an attachment like that, 'cos I had those whole thoughts in my head about being a bad mother like my own. What if I was into drugs and alcohol like my mum was? It was that whole I don't want to turn into my mother, and I've done quite the opposite…that was always one of my fears, what if my children grow up resenting me?*

Although Imogen jokes 'this'll be interesting – how long have you got' in response to a reminder about the interest in care history, suggesting a wealth of experience that could have been derived, narratives of care transitions were fully emphasised throughout Charlotte's life story. Thus, Charlotte's life story more starkly offers an understanding of the process of generational reconciliation experienced through transformative care transitions. Central to understanding the transitional dynamics within Charlotte's family or care trajectories is her relationship with her biological mother and siblings. The contact between Charlotte and her mother ceased between the ages of 8 and 15, during which time she held an image of what her mother represented until she re-established contact with her at age 15. She reflected that 'she wasn't the person I thought she was, and she was just dragging me down with her' and 'she's got a lot of anger obviously inside of her and she blames everybody else. She won't take responsibility for anything'. She moves on to explore in her narrations the reason behind this resentment towards Charlotte surfaced as her siblings will not re-establish contact with their mother. The twists and turns in any shared contact with relations external to the foster home clearly obstructed her ability to integrate into foster family life comfortably, but also manifested into implicating upon her relations with her adopted mother, in particular. In narrations regarding a series of letters written to Charlotte when she around 15, she stresses:

> *She was writing sniping about me being adopted – even though it wasn't my fault! It wasn't my choice! You know…And, in fact, the reason why a lot of my adoption places broke down was because I blamed my adopted mum for stopping her from being my mum. And it was only when I hit 18 or 19 that I realised that I actually would have been better off with my adopted mum.*

Charlotte narrates how she held onto the childhood desire to be in contact with her mother, and the significance of her mother's powerful rebuttals when she made the infrequent contact were brought further to fore when she became a mother herself:

> *Now that I'm a mum, I hate her more. Not for putting us into care, I understand why we went into care in the first place. I mean, yeah, I think it's your own fault – you shouldn't have pushed all your friends away, you shouldn't have annihilated your own family, and whatever. But I don't understand what happened there, that's her past. What makes me angry now is, even if something happened to me, and Lily had to go somewhere else, I would die fighting to get her back. I would never, ever stop. And she just gave up. She didn't even turn to the court room to contest the adoption.*

Charlotte moves on to mention how she will not be able to reach a point of reconciling her differences with her birth mother due to her perspective now as a mother herself. This resolution is further embedded due to her anger at the absence of a grandmother in her daughter's life:

> *I hate her more now for the fact that she can be so selfish…and I hate her for the fact that I've got to explain that to my daughter…You know, sorry darling, but your grandparent is a complete loser. That's not what a child wants to hear, is it?'*

Charlotte's narrations suggest that her care transitions were overwhelmed by periods of separation with siblings upon entry into care placements or following placement break down. Charlotte also explores her distaste towards the decision making processes of care

services in deciding to separate her from her younger brother who she had been placed with in foster care for two years before her adoption. After being adopted alongside her sister she 'couldn't accept my past and move on from that…There's been no explanation. No-one explained why we were all adopted [separately]'. These relations, both internal and external to the processes within her care trajectory evoked questions to Charlotte that were difficult for her understand during these significant familial transitions. This internal questioning was triggered further by existing relationships with key workers within the local authority, in particular, a social worker who did not explain to her why she could not be adopted alongside her brother. Her sense of mistrust for key workers, and social services, was further entrenched into the future due to a sense they were 'moving the goalposts' in offering contact with family for obliging behaviour: 'They kept making promises that they were never going to fulfil just to shut me up'.

Although Charlotte can now piece together the snippets of information that she overheard, or was told, at the time these transitional events marked a critical point within her care trajectory that evoked a sense of abandonment, both within and towards the care system. She offers a narrative episode regarding this time when she became aware that she would be separated from her brother:

> *…Somebody didn't actually tell me. I overheard. It was sitting outside the lounge door and the social worker was sitting there discussing [Charlotte and her brother's subsequent placements] saying they couldn't adopt me and my brother together, because I wasn't good for him…It destroyed me that day. I was 9, just under 9. Just before my 9th birthday we went to my adopted*

> *parents…They reckoned the reason he wasn't learning properly, and he was a bit slow in his learning, was because I was doing too much for him. So, I used to feed him, change his nappies, put him to bed, you know.*

Key to Charlotte's future transitions, up until the present, has been this period of mental reconciliation in which she has needed to trace her movements and further understand the reasons why particular decisions were made, and why she was living separately to her siblings. Whilst Charlotte may put forward an explanation that social service mismanaged her case, she is also left having no answers about some decisions and events that precipitated her transitions between care placements. This narrative is fundamental to understanding Charlotte's story, but also the *mental trap* young people may fall into when the period of important reconciliation of the past is protracted and stretched over time:

> *…if someone had sat down and explained everything and said this is why you're being adopted, this is what your mother has done, this is why we it would be better for you. Then I might have said, okay I'm not happy about it but I'll do it. But you know, no-one had told me so as far as I was concerned my mum was still holier than thou and I wanted to be with her.*

The previous narration above seems to be the result of information that she gathered post-facto. However, at the time she was unaware that her foster parents (pre-adoption) 'begged social services to let them adopt us' and they 'said 'no', for some reason. God knows why'. Charlotte's life story directly and indirectly suggests that she has had access to various records involving her time in care, a narration regarding her transitions towards an adopted

family unit highlights how retraction of this information would have left her internal questioning wanting as a child:

> *I went to them when I was 9; the adoption actually took place when I was 10. There was a letter. My brother's foster parents contested the adoption, erm because they wanted proper contact rights put in before the adoption went through, which never happened. Social workers actually decided that I shouldn't have any contact with my birth family because it was stopping me from moving on. It was pretty messed up back then.*

The proliferation of these issues surrounding her care placement transitions has provoked an incessant need to reinterpret these childhood experiences, and thus define and redefine her perceptions of family. This state is particular stark within narrations that developed relating to re-contact with her biological mother via a series of emotionally charged letters and re-kindling her relationships with her siblings. The lived experiences Charlotte endured during familial transitions between homes of adoptive and foster parents were to be further deleterious and were unhelpful in stabilising her already fractious care trajectory. These discrete transitions had a layering impact in terms of her level of trust with external relations, and were regressive in the sense they were not conducive to helping with her interpretations of family life to a more positive end.

Charlotte experienced a serious physical assault that resulted from being kidnapped, plied with drugs and beaten-up by her foster sister and her friends. A court case resulted and this precipitated her transition to another foster care home, one in which the individuals could

not trace her. This foster home became her long-term arrangement from the age of 13 to 17 until the funding for this placement expired. In Charlotte's narrations relating to her long-term foster care family, the degree of felt relatedness and instrumental support offered did not help her reconcile her past transitional experiences, and notions of family life that Charlotte held remained unchallenged. Charlotte's care transitions in this sense were regressive rather than transformative, as they had the potential to be.

Here we see the twist in her narrations of this part of the past that demarcates a period of care fatigue. Although Charlotte's funding expired for this placement, her social worker at the time was able to secure more for her, but 'by that point I was so sick of being labelled a foster child, I just wanted to go'. Charlotte narratives of this time in her long-term placement suggest that relationships were not founded into the long-term upon reciprocity and trust, and this engrained her notions of independence in terms of decision making about who should remain in her life in the absence of supportive relations. Charlotte narrates of a lack of intuition from her long-term foster carers in supporting her into independence: 'I was quite close to my foster parents just after I left, but they were of the impression that - because they have got so many foster children - it's not up to them to keep in touch with you'. In a narrative which illuminates the implication of a placement that does not allow for a degree of reconciliation of the past and support into the future, Charlotte explains:

> *I got to the point in my life where I'd got so many people doing that to me, I just went no, sod it, had enough of that now. I am going to actually start spending time with the people that actually want to be in my life…I had cut*

all contact with Agency 1 at that point. I wanted to prove that I could do it on my own. I didn't need to – I just didn't want to be labelled the foster kid anymore.

Whilst Charlotte maintains that in the past she desired not to be 'labelled the foster kid anymore' in a move to establish her own independence, there remains a strong need to understand and reconcile the past as an act of mental strength to move forward:

I was more protective of my brother and sister than I was about what happened to me. I wasn't really that bothered about what had happened to me...Because I'm a survivor; I'll do whatever I need to do to survive. But, my brother and sister still don't acknowledge the past...As far as my sister is concerned life started the day she was adopted. So.

Charlotte's other narratives of time post-care were further wedded to narrations of being a 'survivor', particularly how she built up her own strategy for survival upon leaving care and how her change in status in becoming a mother gave her further mental recourse to carve her own path. Whilst Charlotte's maintains, in part, that she wanted it this way in order to gain a sense of achievement, in spite of her birth mother, she holds onto a sense of abandonment from services in offering a viable alternative framework of support:

Everything I have is mine so I'm quite proud of that achievement really but I could have had that years ago. It's taken me to the age of 27 just to be able to survive. Whereas if social services had helped me in the beginning then it wouldn't have taken 10 years to get all that. I could have started having a life back then.

Moreover, in contrast to Charlotte, Imogen built an enduring relationship with her long-term foster carer and foster siblings and her care trajectory was not intertwined with the negotiation of relationships with birth family members.

7.2.3. Bronwyn and Emma: Family displays and motherhood, building notions of family from care experiences, independence as status reversals

Degrees of generational reconciliation were brought to the fore within both Charlotte and Imogen's transition biographies, with experiences of motherhood representing a reflection of the independence that emanated. These qualities were echoed in the stories of Bronwyn and Emma, however, across both of the life stories it was apparent that, in a metaphorical sense, motherhood gave the young people a means to express and rethink what being in a family represents. Across both of their life courses, we see how biographical disruption in terms of family life can induce the reconstruction of family eclipsing other held notions of independence. Whilst both life stories drew on a raft of issues pertaining to the transitional fluxes associated with multiple care transitions, these experiences had an external quality due to linked generational-relational aspects dominating independence sense making. This is despite both of the young people transitioning from long-term foster care placements. Motherhood precipitated an early transition from these homes, as both of the young women expressed in narratives of this time that they were experiencing 'stable' homeliness. The narratology of their care trajectories suggests that transitions towards a state of channelled independence were thrown off course by the status of motherhood. In these cases, the respective statuses of motherhood gave them the expression through which to recalibrate

their views on family, their held meanings of care-related transitions suggest that a system of care did not provide this.

Bronwyn and Emma's narratives suggest that these metaphors for understanding family were carried forward into independence, but importantly did not overwhelmingly derive from care experiences, but through the symbolism of losing their birth mothers and becoming mothers themselves. In their present life, the expression of relatedness showed itself distinctly across their life stories. For Bronwyn, representations of family were more strongly aligned to other 'care leavers', and this explicitly related to her present life and the future. Bronwyn's narratives of care transitions suggest a fracturing of relations with her peers because of her teenage motherhood and experiencing transitions between care settings. What is interesting about the narrative above is the newly acquired sense of affinity with care-experienced young people who understand the shared past care affiliation as 'it's a big difference to actually having a biological family, someone who has been there for the whole journey'. Bronwyn's transition biography draws upon a sense of being disassociated with her peer group, to her current peer group representing her relational agency – to her, they are a safe basis from which to explore her past care trajectory and fractured family life with others who 'understand the journey'.

Emma's narratives, in slight contrast, focus more on the sense of relatedness through a collective voice of care-experienced young people as 'survivors'. Following a narrative

regarding Agency 1 as 'family', Emma expressed she was enabled by a degree of comfort in talking through her experiences within the organisational setting:

> *I used to be really cagey about my life in care and not tell anyone. I used to be ashamed that my mum couldn't love me, that I was in care. But now, I'm actually proud of it….Everything happens for a reason; and that's how I started looking at it – you know what, I'm proud I did it. I got through it. I survived the system.*

Although Emma also referred to a sense of kinship with others who have been in care, her present independence was certainly tied to separating her new sense of self from the past and rebuilding family foundations. This is apparent in relation to her narratives regarding her present status as a carer to her biological father and in raising her daughter. Emma certainly couches her transcendence metaphors for care transitions in terms of fatalism, but she often narrates that she now draws strength from this process. It appears, that her present statuses as a mother and carer has reframed what she thinks is capable and has also brought notions of stability to her present and future life. This sense of strength also arose out of the support apparent, as she transitioned into these new statuses during her movement to independent living at age 16. In alluding to her sensory material, Emma turned to metaphors to explain this process of transcendence and the dynamics anchored her independence and sense of stability:

> *… I didn't know where I should be….and decided London is where I should be, with my family. For my present I have a picture taken 15 floors up when it*

was a clear day. It's kinda how I feel now about my life. It's gone clear from being mixed up and not knowing where to go. By asking for help, I realise that I know where I'm going now.

During the later stages of her life story, Emma moves on to convey a sense of newfound security she has gained in her role as mother and carer. Emma's narratives of transition evidently are bounded to her status as a mother. The relational dynamics she experienced in parallel to various transitional movements were significant in how her role as a mother crystallised. Emma states how she faced judgemental attitudes towards her due to her association with the care system, drug usage and supplying, and as a teenage mother:

I find that a lot with life. That I'm apologising to people about what I've done in my life. It's like, I don't really want to know you, but it's not me now. It's who I was.

The roles ascribed to her status shifts have allowed her to build an independent self she is proud of, a sense that she is following the right path. Emma, however, underlines the place of support for her role as a mother had on delineating previous deleterious trajectories:

I realised that, talking to my other friends who are mums, if social services are not involved, they are a lot more open about their feelings and stuff. …That's why I want to work with [Agency 1], 'cos both me and Jo [another care leaver] have found that when we struggle with everyday things mum's struggle with, we don't ask for help in case it's held against us. So, that's why things are a lot clearer now, 'cos no-one can take anything from you and I can ask for help.

Bronwyn expressed similar meaning attributed to later independence following pervasive disruption in family relations whilst in the care system. However, Bronwyn's association with the care system was instrumentally and psychologically more damaging to her status as a mother. To Bronwyn, building a home was strongly representative of independence and symbolic of her 'journey' from care to her current life. Although 'It's a struggle' to rebuild after transitioning from a home she shared with her former partner after exiting care, she underlines the importance of rebuilding: 'I have to do it. At least now I know the lesson that everything is mine, and it's going to stay mine'. The following narrative extract also highlights how homemaking is presently her stabilising influence:

> *Ah, it feels so much better that I will be one spot for a year and don't have to move. The ways things are going, I don't think I'll be moving…It's a lot better than living in uncertainty and all that kind of stuff.*

The following chapter will turn analytical attention to care trajectories 6-7 and the associated metaphors derived.

CHAPTER EIGHT - FINDINGS: CARE TRAJECTORIES 6-7

8.1. Care trajectory 6: Mediating pseudo-independence in experiencing regressive care transitions

8.1.1. Hari: Performing independence as remedying 'failures'

Aspects of Hari's transition biography as narrated expressed a sense of *care fatigue*. Hari drew on his care trajectory as being representative of a series of dramatic transitional movements into and between care placements, interspersed by transitions to and from the home of his birth mother before returning into the care system. Hari's narrations suggested his experiences of care reflected a merger of transitions within a rather protracted care journey. Notions of care fatigue emanating from within Hari's life story are attributed to the number, types and frequency of movement between the 32 plus care arrangements he experienced. A narrative excerpt below highlights how closely intertwined his meaning making of his transitions was with perceptions of both the care system and his birth mother.

> *Well, I fled from New Zealand when I was 2 years old/1 and a half. So, I came to live here. As soon as I touched down from the airport the [state authority] took us. I was probably about 1 and a half to 2 years old. Basically, a long story short, I've been in [state authority] for about 17 years. I'm 19 now. And to be honest, they didn't really give two hoots. Because, not only was my mum unfit to raise us, she just didn't have no care in the world for having two kids. From 2-3, 4-5, 5-6, not one of us have been in her care for more than one year. Yeah, I've been in over 32 different placements, and counting.*

Hari's early presentation of his life story sets the scene for the remainder of his narrative episodes regarding his experiences of transitions. Hari remained in the care system for the majority of his childhood, and had a variation of care types, both on a formal and informal basis. The first experience of foster care he recalls occurred at age 3, placed alongside his older brother, this arrangement was marred by incidences of sexual abuse.

From within Hari's story a clash of social statuses result from the proliferation of events that have occurred across his life course and the associated transitional fluxes. Hari experienced various transitions into the care system and between placements, and included transitions back and forth between care and the home of his birth mother. He draws on a metaphor to describe the pretext to his transitions of himself (and his brother) being a 'smelly kid'. This metaphor was used to explain the neglectful behaviour patterns of his mother regarding his personal hygiene, but also to underline how educational and care services were always prominent during his childhood as he was under their radar: 'um, I was pretty much the smelly kid…If anything happened, they could tell there were situations at home that weren't perfect'. The aforementioned tension seems to derive from his desire to pursue legal channels regarding the management of his care and a well-developed focus upon the future evoked through parenthood:

> *… now our life revolves around us and her [his daughter]. We try to keep the negativity out. Whatever happened in the past, you know, it's in a closet – locked up with a key inside the lock.*

The experiences in his early care trajectory, and later in how his wellbeing was not considered when he was transitioning between the care system and the home of his birth, mother foreground the life story of this young parent. From within Hari's story one gains the sense that, although his care order has formally ceased, his narratives are not founded upon developing a sense of an independent self away from the care system. Understandably, experiences of early sexual abuse, and having limited recollections of these events, or receiving no therapeutic intervention he states he required, would explain the focus upon events that occurred within this care placement. However, there exists a contradiction with this sense making regarding independence due to his competing social statuses. It is clear that parenthood has enshrined a state of independence that results from this change in role status, and one he narrates clearly, but he has developed a strong desire to seek mental redress and pursue legal channels against those whom managed the more deleterious aspects of his care trajectory. After seeking a further re-statement of his anonymity, Hari narrated:

> *Well, me and my brother – my brother was brutally assaulted, you could say, treated like s**t – we are actually suing [statutory authority] and it's going to be about a 2-3 year process. So, it's going to be a big law suit. Mentally, because his mentality has gone through the roof. He's got PTSD and mentally he can't deal with it like. He would be another good person for you to talk to 'cos he'd have heaps of stuff to say. I guess, the only way I learnt was by turning to drugs and alcohol. By the time I was 15, I was taking Ecstasy, speed, running away from placements. Yeah, I felt obligated to go back and see my mum all those times, after all the stuff she's done to us, because you only have one mum in the world you know.*

Hari's sense making that traces the past to the present suggests that the legal channels he is exploring are not, in essence, about seeking redemption. His narrations convey that seeking legal redress is an outcome of this developed sense of 'control' over his circumstances: 'I've managed to come to a sense that I can now control what happened in the past – when I was from 13 to 17, I couldn't'. He moves on to state that between these ages he experienced a decaying of trust with key workers within the statutory authority due the described transitional flux across his care trajectory and a symbolic intervention from another service that 'insisted' Hari was provided with a support worker specialising in alcohol and drugs misuse. Hari recalls that this was a timely intervention because 'my mental situation wasn't any good. Because I did feel suicidal. I did self-harm. I did jump off a bridge. I did cut my wrists. I did yeah, I felt on the edge of the world'. He expresses in various narratives that the statutory authority disenfranchised him and his brother:

> *Apart from that [the early foster care placement], yeah I've been to heaps of foster homes. Yeah, I never had the love or the nurture that the others around us had, the other kids. So, it was really hard in a way. But without all that I wouldn't be here where I am, I guess {pause}*

Concerning this narrative, there appears to be a lack of resonance with the remainder of his transition biography in terms of the significance of the multitude of care placements and acknowledged mismanagement of his care trajectory. Other narratives allude to a sense of severe desolation in the past, for instance, when describing how him and his brother 'would have to run away to feel happy' when living with carers that did not express care for them. There is a disjuncture between his experiences of the care system as narrated, and his

perceptions of how this fits with his trajectories denoting his character or a state of independence. In his narrations regarding his last placement, in particular, a sense of pseudo-independence is derived. In narratives that highlight this state, Hari describes the family arrangement in which he stayed from age 15 until when he transitioned to independent living age 17. During this timeframe, Hari mentions the failure of care services to find an appropriate foster family home. Hari spent the majority of these two years living within the home of a friend, an arrangement that was meant to be short-term for a period of a week. Hari recalls contact from the statutory authority during the second week of the stay when he was informed he could stay for several months. Significant weight in the narratives is given towards a perception that he was settled and required little support. However, this long-term arrangement was fraught with difficulties due to his changing relationship with his friend and their mutual drug abuse and criminal activity. This notion of pseudo-independence is most pertinent once Hari reached 17 and services failed to find him a lead-tenant arrangement. He narrates that 'everything went downhill' as: 'I was working and so they [statutory authority] thought 'he has got his act together. He's working now, so we're going to close his file because there is no point in reopening and re-entering care 'cos he's almost 18'.

At age 17, Hari resided again with his mother and the relationship was again very precarious and accumulated in physical assaults. Hari expresses distaste at how the care services held a view that he exhibited the markers for independence, and that absent was any support in helping him assume the new status from young person in care to adult. After his disruptive

experiences back in the home of his mother and his experiences of homelessness, Hari was able to secure help finding and funding accommodation in Agency 3's 'transitional home'. He also received further support of a financial nature in purchasing items for his daughter and equipment to help him in his aspirations to produce documentaries. Hari acknowledges this support as crucial in helping him set-up home and pursue a secure future life with his long-term girlfriend, though the process of constructing his life story evoked a summation about 'who's to blame?' about the impact of his care transitions upon his life. He alludes to a certain strength taken from coming through his experiences:

> *…right up until 17 I was blaming myself. I didn't know any better. Though, if you asked a 13-year-old who had been through all the stuff I had to, they would be like I wouldn't know what to do. At the end of the day, you know, everything's worth something.*

His other narrations regarding his litigation towards the care system suggest this desire to seek legal redress is also an expression of this felt strength. Another expression of the 'control' he has regained in relation to the course of his life is expressed in distaste for the ethos of the care system:

> *…they can get away with not wanting to take kids away off people, off their parents – why do they do that? And why do they go and dump them on strangers' doorsteps - here, I will pay you government money to look after these kids until they are old enough. Like the whole procedure needs to stop…The sooner the better that someone stands up and says, you know, 'they don't give two hoots…'*

8.1.2. Hayden and Nicole: Expressions of a state of pseudo-independence

Hari's life story was an exemplar for gaining an understanding of the lineage between regressive care transitions and the derived state of pseudo-independence. This narrated notion of independence emanates from within a suggested expression that negative held connotations of the care system draws young people back into the past status of *child in care* and translates into an independent state that verges uncomfortably between the past and the future self. This sense making also reflects within the life stories of Hayden and Nicole, but the expressions differ according to relational agency that is perceived or evident.

Hayden particularly narrated a strong sense of wanting to re-establish relations with his biological family. Since leaving care at 16, Hayden resides with his older sister in her garden bungalow. Hayden's narrations around held ideals of family and independence suggest this living arrangement is symbolic of his key care and family transitions. This plight becomes clear in narrative episodes about held perceptions relating to being the only family member who entered care and how, despite his care order expiring, he remained separated from family in some sense although they are taking care of his instrumental needs. Across previous transition biographies, a strong sense induced that enduring relationships with long-term foster carers promoted a language of expression through which young people could articulate their histories, suggesting a period of interpretation and realignment with their pasts to move forward with a degree of reconciliation. To Hayden, this process was somewhat stunted, although desired. For instance, he states 'If I was to say in front of

everybody and write it down what I want to say, what I don't want to say, and type it up in a good copy. I'd say…I don't know'. Hayden often drew on the need to talk about the circumstances surrounding his entry into care and care history, but drew parallels in the course of his life story to the context in which he is living that is actively encouraging relatively early independence from family and kin at age 18.

In Nicole's case, the deleterious nature of the instability experienced across her care trajectory is more profoundly evident, both in her narrations of her objective transitional movements and her reflections on her experiences. Nicole's transition biography derives expressions of notions of independence, tied to a process of remedying the *generational harm* that arose from forced states of early responsibility for her own wellbeing and experiences of forms of neglect and abuse (both within her familial home and the care system). Nicole's life story fluidly articulated a raft of negative experiences or held perceptions involving her biological family and care experiences; these two epochs were conflated within the life story due to the prevalence of 'bad' experiences. In a narrative episode that summarised her transition into the home of her long-term foster carers, and her frequent attempts at expressing her disquiet with the arrangement, she describes her transitional experiences as being a 'yo-yo of trying to get away, from the age of 4 till 16'. She moves on reiterating that the professionals managing her placement kept 'sending me back' because 'you know - the support people that were apparently supporting people were not'. Nicole referred to the 'yo-yo' metaphor in articulating the period of flux and, in doing so, underlined how she was enacting her own transitions due to events that were directly

harming her sense of wellbeing. Despite consistent returns to this home, the constant yo-yoing also tipped the balance in terms of an emotional detachment from a sense of experiencing a 'family' as a unit:

> *Oh I was never part of the family. I was never. I was just income. The lost hope that they had to help…I mean, from the moment I was old enough to think 'I want to leave', every day was hell.*

Between the ages of 17 and 19, Nicole experienced intense periods of flux and events which seriously implicated upon her emotional and physical wellbeing. Nicole expresses a period in which her need for expressing an independent self was subsumed by transitional fluxes between the care organization, which consistently requested she returned to her long-term foster carers, and her birth family that she could not re-establish relations with comfortably due to pervasive drug issues. Perhaps ironically, the marking of an end of this pervasive intra-generalisation harm was being cared for foster carers because of an informal placement that serendipity afforded. As Nicole narrates, on being discovered as a 16-year-old runaway: '…because I was fostered they took me to 'mum and dad', where I am now, and from that point they started to try and help me, and I started getting myself together'. And later, when she integrated back into the home at age 19:

> *…I jumped on a train and I walked all the way to mum and dad's - and they didn't recognise me, I was a size 26, I was just messed up – and they took me in, and that was eighteen months ago. You know, now I have my family and my future.*

Although regressive, Nicole's transitions away from a care system during this time suggest exposure to adulthood in varying forms, in terms of a responsibilised requirement to take care of her - expressions of default independence. However, as she is now firmly integrated and settled into the home of 'mum and dad', and there is no need to leave until she is 'ready' to do so, there is fresh scope for notions of an independent identity to be harnessed. To Nicole, this starts with her accessing her care case record as 'I don't know who I am, as in genetically or history-wise. And no-one's really told me anything'.

8.2. Care trajectory 6: Fortuitous transitions delineating trajectories, hyper-dependency

A further two life stories were pinned to a care trajectory in which both of these young people entered care in early childhood, but did not enter (nor transition from) a long-term placement.

8.2.1. Joe: Pervasive transitional instability and a veiled independence

Joe, age 24 at the time of meeting, narrated his life story in an overall expression of candid disbelief that he had experienced so much in his younger years. What is striking about Joe's transition biography is how his narratives communicate a sense of past unreality. In narrative excerpts that relate to family photographs, Joe declares:

> *It's funny because this is my past, but it doesn't feel like it represents my past. It doesn't feel real…I've always felt that when I look at these it doesn't*

feel real. I don't look at this and have that sort of internalised feeling that that ever happened, or ever existed. I can't explain why, that's just how It is.

His life story, in essence, marks a complete deviation from the temporal order of things, especially in contrast to other the life stories within the alternate care trajectories. Previous care trajectories were notable for having moments of relative stability, in terms of particular placement transitions at narrated points in time. In contrast, Joe's care trajectory marked a complete deviation in the temporal order of things, and scant sign of a system of care that stabilised moments across his life course. In summary, Joe experienced a total of 30 foster care placements and approximately 3 children's residential settings from the age of 9 until 14. The dynamics of Joe's care trajectory were transient and fluid in the sense that negotiating the transitions has marked significant and frequent relational shifts and disruption. His past, therefore, could be couched in sense of not feeling 'real' due to the plethora of monumental transitions circumstance dictated.

The nature of the transitions across his care trajectory delineated his other key transitions (such as educational ones) which meant his other trajectories from care were also significantly disrupted. His narratives implicitly suggest this disruption results from the impact of the care system's inability to stabilise his care and family transitions. In narratives regarding his transitions within the care system, Joe explicitly brings to the fore how bounded these became in terms of the proliferation of other transitions which negated any chance of stability. Joe's care trajectory, therefore, is traceable in terms of how movement between care placements negated other key transitions a young person would make in

forging futures. Unfortunately, for Joe, transitions into drug usage and crime to support his habit constricted his independence trajectories. It seems Joe is able to make clear reference to his past in relation to his transitional experiences towards independence due to, at various point in his life, receiving psychological support for his developed drugs and alcohol-addictive behaviours. However, upon reflections of family life pre-care he is able to offer salient narratives regarding his transition from child in a family unit to young person experiencing transitions with negative connotations to the self within his past life (transition) meanings:

> *I think I just grew up being out of place. I think, for whatever reason, my parents didn't really love me properly. As a result of that, I grew up with a bad sense of self. I think that you need to be coached into being at peace with yourself and I think when it came to the time that I had to kind of depend on me emotionally to feel alright – I go into a new school where I didn't know anyone, it was only me that could get me through that. Your parents and your loved ones, or the person you're in a relationship with growing-up should coach you into that; talk to you about it, and just support you and love you till you can love yourself.*

Whilst this excerpt has therapeutic undertones, this has seemingly given Joe a bridging-language in which to explore the emotions that emerged in reconciling the past, and from which to express his key transitions across his life story into the future. For example, in a narrative episode exploring post-care transitions he expresses the internal and external dynamic of drug addiction:

I think when the time came that I was meant to sort of look after myself emotionally, I couldn't. No-one has done it before so I could learn from and about that…Because I couldn't have a relationship with myself. When I looked outside of myself to feel better, I found behaviours to change the way I felt – taking drugs, relationships…The more drugs I took, it became a lifestyle, and to sustain that lifestyle I had to engage in crime or illegal activities. Generally steal or lie or manipulate, to just keep chasing that feeling. But as a result of getting that money to sustain that lifestyle there'd be external consequences. My life became unmanageable and then there'd be internal consequences, the way I would feel, and also my health would deteriorate.

However, an apparent lack of bounded support in his experiences of a system of care is gradually foregrounded in the process of interpretation and other related narratives within the life story. This allowed for a number of narratives more closely related to the dynamics experienced across his multiple care transitions. In reflecting upon notions of relatedness in the past and his direct experiences of multiple care placements, Joe narrates:

I was thinking about this last night, like reflecting on this visit, and I appreciate that I put people in difficult situations. My behaviour wasn't really conducive to how they wanted to work with me. I put people in some real difficult situations and I didn't give a lot of people a lot of choice at the end. So, I guess, you can only help someone that wants to be helped ultimately. I feel social services gave up on me before they started. I felt like I was just another number. I feel a lot of mistakes were made; thought at times I was a bit of a guinea pig.

In an sole narrative excerpt that directly relations to care transitions, Joe's feeling that he 'was just another number' is given further credence in him surmising about the scale of placements he encountered: 'sometimes I wondered if they were doing their job right,

would there have been so many?' Moreover, Joe's perceptions were further underlined through a number of pinpointed errors by care workers that tacitly came through. For instance, there were moments of clear risk that Joe experienced because of mismanagement of his care:

> *I was absconding a lot running away from home, sort of a couple of weeks at a time. A prostitute kind of put me in a taxi one day, because I was sat at the bottom of the stairs in this crack house and she said, there's no way you should be here…. This prostitute said to me, I used to live at [area in South West England] children's home when I was a kid, called a taxi, put me in a taxi and told the staff to tell her that she'd sent me back.*

Joe was oft able to appreciate with clarity the impact of the lived experience of his transitional instability across his biography, and the impact upon his sense of an ability to forge relationships and of being a child: 'I didn't give people a great many opportunities with me. The longer I was in care, the more shut-down I became' and 'by the age of 12, I had like 15 offences hanging over me and I had a black bin-liner with a couple of changes of clothes in it'. Joe's astute ability to reflect upon his experiences, and sense making around the spiralling of transitional events and external relations, evoked some narratives which gave weight to his interpretations of the fluidity of his relationships during this time - 'I think there were opportunities for me to build relationships there, but I just don't think I could engage in that'.

However, these narratives were interspersed with information regarding the role of external relations in failing to offset the instability, which result from his transitions towards recovering from addiction, and how this did not transpire through the care system, but instead via the good will of particular individuals within the criminal justice system. Following extensive narratives regarding drug experimentation , which begun aged 9 within a residential home, and the process of addiction and how it enveloped his transitions towards adulthood, Joe highlighted a psychological turning phase in this interpretation of previous life experiences:

> *When I got in there I sat down, spoke to the solicitor and she was lovely…She always had time for me and she just looked at me and she was able to do something no-one had been able to do before. She was able to hold up a mirror to me almost and show me what I was like. Not literally, but - and she just said a few words to me and I said, right I'm fine I just want to get in, get out, you know I wanted to rush it all. She just said wait a minute, look at what you're becoming. You're not well.*

Joe's narratives of self-change from drug dependency underpinned narrations about his transitions towards adulthood and a relative state of independence. These dominant narratives also derive that independence, to Joe, is a metaphor for both dependence and non-dependence. Other life stories could mark with varying degrees of linearity and clarity the multiplicity of transitions towards adult independence. This tracing from the presence of a system of care towards the transitional symbolism of care leaver status was somewhat lost within Joe's life story. With reference to 'change' in the later course of Joe's life, this supposed stability to his transitions as experienced was largely brought about by seeking

support for his addictive behaviour patterns. This transitional period towards staying 'clean' occurred from age 21, a time when he had no formal affiliation with the care system, and his transitions were entrenched in passages between his own personal states of being either an addict and recovering addict. However, a state of default independence was forced as Joe highlights how no consistent support from the care system was experienced between the ages of 15 and 17.

During this period, Joe highlighted that a key worker gave him short-term emotional support and treats that were not within the realms of normal support: 'I always got that feeling that she was doing too much and her boss or her management didn't like that…I remember her saying, 'I could get in a bit of trouble for this…''. This absence or inconsistency in formal support had a deleterious influence on his immediate transitions towards adulthood due to the post-care, or care leaver, status being forced prematurely. These ages were a crucial time for Joe in his recovery as he had left a setting through which he received therapy. As he reasoned, 'rehab leaves you opened up, and you're a bit of a time bomb that could go off'. In tracing Joe's life story transitions, it appears he left a self-identified system of care when he was age 17, although he did not experience a long-term or significant short-term placement from the age of 15, but had occasional conversations with a post-care support worker. During this period, Joe's transience, precipitated by the nature of his care trajectory, abated. It took Joe to reach the age of 21 until his problems with drug addiction abated alongside the unstable lived experiences in relation to accommodation, the prison service, and strained or distant relations with family members.

In relation to his perception of his transitions experiences, Joe reasons that 'it's just been so different for so long that that's why it doesn't feel real' and qualifies this with '…and I'm alright with that, that's just how it is'. Joe clearly demarcates the past and couches various narrative episodes in terms of developmental 'change', this parallels narratives regarding his phases of drug usage and later patterns of addiction. In referring to his photographs on his youth offending institute and prison ID cards, during periods of being gripped by addiction or detoxing, he states: 'These mean a lot to me, especially when I look at that one, I just - that demonstrates change, and look at me now from there'. He offers extensive narrates regarding the time as a young person who had left care, a period of great flux to Joe:

> *I was everyday [using class A drugs] - just committing crime to get money. Begging, borrowing, stealing, 'Big Issue'. Just, really like on my own…That was quite a rough time. A really rough time!*

Herein, Joe's status as a care leaver was lost. His socio-legal statuses as a looked-after child or care leaver were eschewed by the experiential nature of his transitions. The status change representing the accession of a life away from affiliation with the care system was marked with other transitional fluxes. Joe's experiences towards adulthood were narrated as a state of hyper-reality, within which the inherent transitional dynamics changed and shifted rapidly. These experiences veered between status states of addiction and recovery, homelessness and finding accommodation, the criminal justice system and desistance from crime, and being single or within a significant relationship with a girlfriend (that later developed into a co-dependency entrenched through drug addiction). Due to the

proliferation of experiences surrounding his care transitions, none of the transitional dynamics came to the fore strongly. Each dynamic was experienced as an intense moment, essentially meaning Joe's transitions were erratic and unstable. Joe's expressive and creative ways of describing meant this intensity and proliferation of experiences were expressed across his life story incisively. These incisive narratives are exampled below regarding the transition to the identity as a criminal once he entered an adult prison:

> *So, I was in with strong characters. I was quite vulnerable…I wasn't very strong. I was quite weak and worn-down as a result of going into that jail. I managed to get out. But that was my rock bottom handing myself in - that was my point of surrender. I didn't get clean from then on. I had more things happen and more went on – I knew that was my rock bottom….I was in a homeless shelter, and the night before I'd been shooting-up in a shop door…. Then that was my point of surrender. A lot happened, but then when I got a big prison sentence later on, sort of two months later on, I got held in prison. I got clean and stayed clean….I don't know why I'm clean, but I'm just really lucky. Addiction takes a good 10 years to run its course and I got clean just before I was 22, at the end of my 21st year. I don't know why I'm clean but I am.*

What is interesting in this narrative is how Joe attributes current transitions away from drug addiction, and the ability to carve out a trajectory akin to his future hopes, to 'luck'. This could reflect a philosophy on life borne out of a lack of systematic support for his transitions, and notions of chance or fortune playing a part in where he ends up. Certainly, Joe implicitly highlights a lack of a statement of intent to help support him during pivotal moments in his life, but he does so without reverting to language of blame. He narrates that with a lack of channelled support from a post-care team, he transitioned from a stints in prison to the home of his birth mother or a shared house for young people at risk of homelessness. During

this time he attempted to seek assistance through social services, the first time he did so on his own accord since the age of 15. Whilst he had financial support through a leaving care grant at this time, he states he had difficulties maintaining his independence and 'didn't look after myself very well…I guess it was just easier to try and escape reality as best I could'.

Joe's held notions of independence around this time were pegged towards a state of hyper-reality. In other words, how he understood what independence represented, in the wider sense and to his sense of self, was constrained by the many barriers to which this mental dynamic may have been channelled (and demonstrated). He narrates how he 'used to think about that stuff a lot' in relation to his adult life, 'but it just never happened'. He goes on to mention how his emotionally stability was forfeited due to his past experiences of family and care, with the following narrative being particularly expressive of the consequence to his trajectories:

> *I just used to think a lot of stuff, and I'd daydream about a lot of stuff that I was going to do, and it would all involve me. About me being alright in the future. I used to worry a lot about my wellbeing as a child. I'd always worry about my wellbeing, again being insecure and discontented. I used to daydream…that would keep me feeling alright….Like, I'm going to have some sort of life.*

8.2.2. Shannon: Compressed and multiple transitions stunting independence

Shannon's life story echoed the transitional fluidity that was apparent within Joe's care trajectory. Shannon's narrations, however, are distinct as her transitional experiences are

more tightly bound to events across her care history, somewhat so because Shannon still has close association with the care sector via a post-care support. At the time of meeting, Shannon was experiencing significant transitional flux; her narrations were closely aligned to the impermanence of everything. Her reflections upon her care experience were heavily imbued by a lack of permanency, accentuating in this narrative extract a narrative type that was often repeated: 'foster care is when you move around a lot, and sometimes they don't even let you see your family when you want to see them'.

Shannon was receiving post-care support from a non-governmental organisation at the time of meeting, this assisted her with her independent living needs. This package of support was due to expire, which in some ways brought the raw feelings about her transitional experiences to the fore in a series of emotive narratives, which also conveyed her concern of facing homelessness if her support team cannot secure social housing for her. Whilst Shannon did not articulate her reflections on her care history as clearly as others did, she made a number of narratives that linked to the instability arising from experiencing multiple, short-term placements:

> *It's a load of rubbish, I reckon. You shouldn't be taken off your family. Now, there's too many kids in care. They end up on the streets and they end up getting abused in care, a lot of people get abused now. They turn to drugs - lucky I didn't. It's very traumatising being in care. You are moving around, you get close to people, and then you can't be there. It's a hard life. And it's still getting harder now – nowhere to live.*

Shannon has certainly held onto notions of care fatigue in her frequent slips into narratives about being 'moved around everywhere', and how she is 'still involved with them now'. With most young people across the sample, experiencing thoughts of wanting to be disassociated with the care system peters out into adulthood, and the expression of the phenomenon is couched in the past. To Shannon, it is expressed very much in the present and engrains an opinion on how things should be ideally. For example, this narrative excerpt is typical of Shannon's early-to-mid stages of her life story:

> *They don't look after you. And they promise you when you are 18 that you will have somewhere to live, and they did not – I was homeless.*

Shannon's held notions of independence are clearly linked to belief based on her insight that young people should be supported into a state of independent living, and her narratives are quite punchy due to an expression of dismay at services evoked from the rampant instability that she experiences across her trajectory. She narrates about her transitional history that: 'You don't stay in a place for more than six months – moving around and they lie to you, too. They should make it 21, at 18 you are not ready to move out'. Shannon acknowledges that a lead-tenant programme she was involved with helped someway provide a constant environment from which she could develop her independence and stabilise her previous transitional flux, but her held view is this ceased prematurely:

> *It's better. But when you turn 18, you are not ready to be on your own if you've been dependent on everyone all your life. You are dependent on everyone then, all of a sudden, you are put in the world. There's no-one to help. Even now it's hard. When they [the organisation] finish with me, it will be just me.*

During the later stages of her life story Shannon begun to articulate that her transitions were not only multiple, but temporally compressed, meaning the ability to assimilate the proliferation of change brought about through the process was not supported. These experiences evidently compounded the relational dynamic as she had a lack of requisite time to integrate into a family home, and the negotiations of relationships with members of her birth family remained difficult. Whilst Shannon recognises that various affiliates with the care sector are 'helping the best they can with me', and she remains in contact with various workers from her past, the relational aspects of her story denote her unease that she is not having a 'young life':

> *I don't have a life to be honest. That's what I feel like. All your life, people control you, and now me controlling me is hard…. There is no-one there if you are struggling. There's no-one to call up and say you need help. You buy your own food, clothes, clean – I don't mind doing that, I hate mess. It's hard because every time you are in care, they do everything for you. Now I'm in the real world, it's scary...*

Shannon certainly conveys an expressed artificiality to her experiences that sets her aside from having the transitional experiences requisite to having a perceived normalised 'young life'. She expresses that her current living circumstances severely curtail her ability to build

relationships with people her own age as she is not in a 'safe environment for someone young'. Shannon clearly, and understandably, fears returning to the turmoil she experienced during periods of homelessness – 'I don't want to go back to how I used to be. I just want to stay positive. And some days it's hard to stay positive when nothing goes right'. There exists a narrated tension between her need to receive support and her desire to have the agency to be independent, unfortunately for Shannon her narratives certainly suggest her care trajectory and early forced independence did not facilitate the skills or the mental recourse to become 'independent' in the near future. She narrates clearly about the worth of various programmes of support she is involved through a post-care team or agencies independent of the care sector, she deadpans – 'everyone needs support these days, especially the way the world's going'. Her frustration surfaces as she underlines that she 'is trying to get her life on track' and her narratives wholly suggest there is a systematic and distant force that is acting as a barrier to enable her. This spurs an overwhelming desire for the consistent sense of security that the system failed to befit her during her care trajectory, and so she aspires to:

> *Find somewhere to live, a stable house for good. Somewhere I don't have to move anymore, where I will settle for life. I don't like moving my life about – I've lost so much stuff in my life. Photos, everything I've lost. Stuff gets stolen.*

These narratives regarding losing items in her past precede others declaring her desire to trace the whereabouts of her biological father. To Shannon, the building of the future rests upon reaching an understanding of the past.

The following chapter will place the findings with respect to how these transition biographies have enhanced understanding of the theoretical premises running through the research. It will advance a contemporary anthropological frame for understanding transitional experience that has derived directly from the findings.

CHAPTER NINE - DISCUSSION: YOUTH (IN) TRANSITION, THE SEMANTIC TRAP

9.1. Introduction: Theoretical premises derived across transition biographies

This chapter offers a discussion of the theoretical premises running through the study in view of the findings, as derived from a facet methodology orientation presenting twenty transition biographies of foster care-experienced youth. It was acknowledged across Chapters Two and Three that understanding of the experiences of transitioning youth is culturally and temporally located. The socially constructed nature of 'childhood', 'youth', and 'adulthood' within the life course limits the conceptual clarity and stability of 'transition'. The experience of transition is pitched towards channelled movement between the age categories, despite the acknowledged shifting and contestable representations. This thesis explored the transition biographies of foster care-experienced young people. In doing so, the empirical study aimed to advance understanding of transition as a dynamic existing within a relational realm of experience. This position opposes the perception of the young person's biography as an individual mediation of agentic behaviour consistent with movement towards adulthood.

The findings show transition to be a heuristic concept, one enveloped by complex relational dynamics as young people make their future journeys. Therefore, discursively normalised descriptions of what transition entails, compounded by the concept's conflation with 'youth', are unhelpful. These conceptual issues rest within the context of findings from this study indicating a myth of 'independence' as a natural precursor to, or extension of,

adulthood. Analytical interconnectivity was sought between the care trajectory facet and the sense making facet. The relatedness facet signified an experiential mediator that inducted the held significance of linked lives, aiming to seek understanding of transition as a relational and dynamically situated experience.

To this end, the analysis of the life stories derived across England and Melbourne were not presented in a comparative fashion, as the research sought to capture a holistic understanding of young peoples' transitional experiences through a relational-biographic analytical frame of reference. The thesis of Hantrais (1999) well-exemplifies the divergence in approaches towards research conducted in alternate country contexts. Hantrais (1999) presents an historical comparison of the epistemological statuses within social research conducted cross-nationally. She identifies manoeuvres from (and between) 'context-free to context-bounded research'; these find definitional form as three approaches to cross-national research (Hantrais, 1999: 94-97): 1. The Universalist approach seeks patterns of convergences across case sites with regards to a pre-selected theoretical framing on a phenomenon. 2. The Culturalist approach is guided by cultural relativism between cross-national sites in seeking to derive the uniqueness of particular social contexts; differences which may offer analytical interpretations of phenomenon. 3. Societal approaches identify the distinctive qualities of the cross-national site, and analyse phenomenon in terms of the nuances intrinsic to this discretely different system. In reflecting on Hantrais's thesis in relation to the links between analysis and this discussion, it is posited that the epistemological genesis and contextualisation of the social phenomenon in focus steers the

essence of the analysis of comparatively derived data. Herein lies the justification for not sorting, presenting and subsequently analysing the storied data in a comparative sense.

The forthcoming sections will present exemplars from across the twenty transition biographies. The discussion will highlight how understanding of the concept of transition has been enhanced, by drawing upon the nature of particular care trajectories and associated multiplicity of care-related family transition, as this was inherent to an analytical facet. It will focus particularly on how experiential meaning making derived across the narratives enhance the efficacy of a contemporary anthropologically grounded perspective on transition.

9.2. Returning to the epistemological fallacy of transition: Refining anthropological frames

The transition biographies of the participants were analytically grounded according to seven distinct care trajectory clusters, this induced metaphors for illuminating the narrated transitional experiences. The substantive literature underpinning the aims of this thesis highlighted a lack of conceptual clarity to inform understanding on contextually dependent transitioning, and lived reality of these through the meanings ascribed by those who have experienced them. Whilst this lack of clarity is presented as a recurrent theoretical and methodological theme grounding this thesis in terms of its aims, it is important to recognise the semantic trap of 'being in transition' as represented in the youth study and policy arena. An epistemological fallacy presents of 'transition' as consistent with underpinning principles attached to life course phases and movement between them, with assumptions therefore

being placed upon the experience of 'youth'. This fallacy links to how the twinned concepts of youth and transition remain etched in terms of mainstream role ascriptions and transition as a vehicle towards movement through the life course.

9.2.1. Liminality and rites of passage: A classic anthropological frame for understanding transition

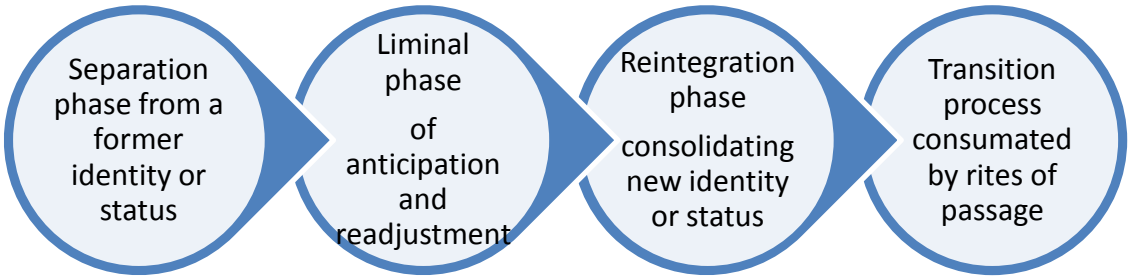
In revisiting these conceptual tensions reinforced through the conflation of youth and transition, which discursively casts the experiences of young people in terms of their pathway planning competencies, the necessity for a contemporary anthropological frame of reference to understanding transition strongly emerges. This section will briefly return to anthropological bases through which the concept of a transition biography took shape, before a discussion on how the transition dynamics induced from the findings can encapsulate the development of a contemporary frame. As raised within Chapters Two and Three, anthropological studies conducted by Mead (1943) and van Gennep (1960) observed life course phases consistent with 'youth' as being experienced as a process of relatively smooth and linear integration into adulthood within a given society (as highlighted, the cultural context typified the nature of this transitional process). These transitional processes were culturally sanctioned through the dynamic of typical ceremonial *rites of passages* associated with young people transitioning towards adulthood from their non-status as young liminads.

Anthropological studies lay in contrast to the psychological *storm and stress* models for understanding young peoples' epitomised struggle towards adulthood. However, they also

highlight how the transition process observed was culturally specific and could not directly inform understanding of contemporary contextually-dependent transition, despite its importance in advancing 'real world' understanding of transition as lived by young people. These studies predate the imposition of sociological and policy interest in young peoples' transitional pathways, and so offer a salient frame of reference for understanding the lived experience of transition that is not laden with current discursive frames of problematised youth and transitioning.

The *Rites of passages* thesis centres on transitional movement between life course epochs through phases, but has potential for an extended frame in terms of transitional dynamics aligned with the young person in relation to lived experience of generational support and relatedness. Notions of youth representing a period of 'social puberty' (van Gennep, 1960), wherein culturally specific *rites of passages* before transition to another status marks lived experience, in a sense denotes a degree of cultural and social determinism with potential for aligned with idealised transitional dynamics. However, to Turner (1987), transitional liminality is emblematic of uncertainty about how the transition will proliferate in terms of status or identity shifts. As Illustration 5 shows, liminality is positioned as representing an aspect of the transitional process that is observed as a multiple transition process, consolidated through a *rite of passage,* and indicative of a status shift.

Illustration 5: Classic anthropological frame of the youth transition process



Adapted from: van Gennep (1960) *The Rites of Passage,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

In cross-referencing these observations highlighted, the transitional process will assume the following:

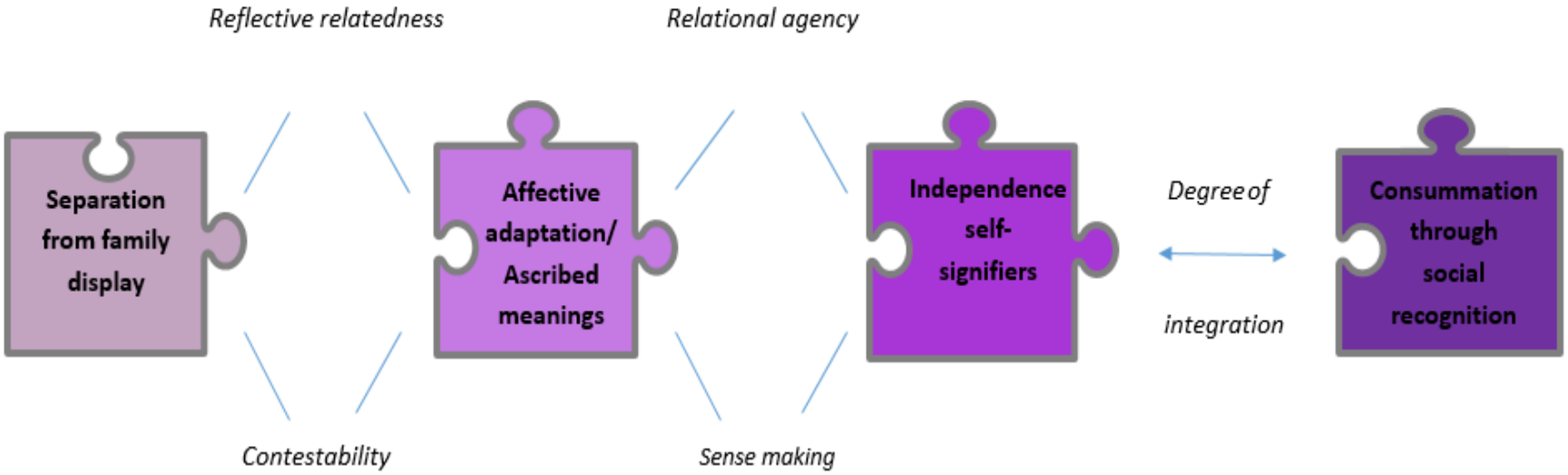
- A period of gradual separation from a former identity or status occurs in acceptance that transition(s) are occurring, presenting as a transitional preparation phase
- A period of liminality, whereby there is an inherent experience of individual anticipation and readjustment whilst experiencing the transition
- Reintegration as an accumulation to the transitional process, here an individual is observed as socially integrating into a newly ascribed status and identity.
- A symbolic ceremony presents as a social consolidation to the reintegration phase, namely a *rite of passage.*

9.2.2. Experiential mediations and strong or weak forms of social recognition: A contemporary anthropological frame for understanding transition

In light of the theoretical premise to this research and the findings, a contemporary anthropological frame for advancing understanding of transitional experiences was crafted, placing the young peoples' transition biographies at the heart of this reframing. Classic anthropological frames refer to transition as a process with an intended socially integrative outcome, however culturally ascribed and diverse this outcome is. Therefore, transitional experiences of 'youth' are described as processional phases, from separation, into the liminal, and accumulating in reintegration. In crafting a contemporary anthropological frame for understanding transitional experience, instead of distinguishing aspects of transition according to phases of a procession process, the discrete and yet interconnected aspects identified are 'jigsaw pieces' - representative of the dynamic of transition amid its plurality.

Illustration 6 shows each jigsaw piece represents a realm of transitional experience, with the first three pieces being common to the methodological facets explored, and thus the study's epistemological status in exploring transition. These pieces are comparable across transition biographies through the differing degrees of mediation that presents within the transition biography. The nature of the embeddedness, stability and quality of these pieces of the transition jigsaw are ascribed to the transitional mediators between these pieces. The analytical facets induced the saliency of these mediators.

Illustration 6: The transition jigsaw



The preceding diagram presents the' transition jigsaw'. This is representative of the identified dynamics and experiential realm of young peoples' lives in transition. In the context of the study, the dynamical pieces relate to the methodological facets and so refer directly to care-experienced young people. The first piece of the transition jigsaw represents displaying 'family', whereby a separation occurs from unit a young person denoted as representing kinship affiliations. The second piece is representative of the affective adaptation that occurs when encountering multiple transition-like experiences due to a family separation, whilst also being the centre of reflective meaning making ascribed to the encounters.

The two transitional mediators induced from the findings as significant to the ability for affective recalibration, and to reflections into the present, are 'reflective relatedness' and 'contestability' (to be discussed in relation to the findings in Section 9.3). These reflective mediators represent how sound the sense of anticipation about transition(s) occurring is or were, and the scope for active reflections on family displays: that is, who is the family unit and what is the nature and intensity of the separation. These mediators are deeply embedded within the dynamic of remembrance and meanings ascribed to experiences and reflections upon times of intense family unit fragmentation and reformation.

The third jigsaw pieces presents as independence self-signifiers, with the mediators of 'relational agency' and 'sense making' emerging as an important supportive bridge from the

affective adaptation/ascribed meanings jigsaw piece (these mediators are to be discussed in Section 9.4). The scope to define relational agency – or, having an established sense of resolution about felt kinship and who is included as representing 'family' - arose as a significant mediator to self-signifiers of held notions of independence. Another mediator between the second and third piece of the transition jigsaw, inducted across the data, was scope to stamp individuality onto the experience of transition and sense making.

Alternatively, recognition of how a plethora of transition-like experiences does not subsume any held resolution in relation to the past and notions of survival or transcendence. The schema evolving for self-signifiers of independence is mediated by the narrative expression of integration, which may or may not result in strong or weak (desired or undesired) forms of material or symbolic social recognition afforded the transition(s) experience. The differing or comparable degrees of integration - presenting as integration, reintegration, integrative-stasis, or disintegration - will be discussed specifically in Section 9.5. The forthcoming sections will thus highlight the significance of the transitional mediators within the transition biographies of the participants.

9.3. Transitional mediators and expressions within metaphors of transition

This section discusses exemplars drawn from the transition biographies of the participants and the interconnected analytical metaphors of transition that were evoked. It will explore how the sense of anticipation and control, traceable in contestability, amid held notions of

relatedness, foster mediation between aspects of these transition dynamics: separation from family displays and the scope for affective adaptation and self-ascribed meaning making. These dynamical mediators enhance understanding of the plurality of transitional experiences. It is posited that these mediators are sites where the transitional experience is most susceptible to institutionally sanctioned decisions about family change upon a trajectory, and the nature of the relationship with social workers. Here is where the relationship with time is most important. George (2003) highlighted that young peoples' relationship with time during transition involves the temporal phasing of change, the sequence of transition, and how long an individual has a role as a dependent status between any distinct transitions. Whilst, Abbott in *Time Matters* discusses the 'narrative concept' of events, transitions or turning points within trajectories. He argues the narrated social reality of an experience of transition(s) can be 'imagined as a structure in which actors proceed through trajectories to their ends' into which they 'face the striking and to some extent randomising moments of turning points' (Abbott, 2001: 25).

However, the findings suggest that it is tricky to identify how temporality mediates transition, particularly as transition was found to be a site of the past. That transition is articulated through narratives of the past, and meaning is ascribed to the experience in terms of sites of significance in the life story. Chance encounters, or 'turning points', may indeed set in motion a chain of events, but whether a transition has occurred is open to other mediators other than time. Yet, youth is cast as a relatively time-limited life phase, and so young people are under pressure to 'build a meaningful relationship with social time' (Leccardi, 2005: 124), in the purview of their lived experiences, future expectations and

accordingly to societal mores. Transition was found to be where held remembrance or symbolism placed upon notions of relatedness is most evident at the juncture or past site when recalibration about family expresses itself clearly. In this sense, placing pressure on the young persons' mediation of transition in terms of negotiating the timing involved in navigating particular trajectories is counterproductive to easing the phase of any change.

9.3.1. Reconstructive, renewed and transformative transitional mediators

Transition biographies of twelve participants induced three differing analytical metaphors signifying their transitional experiences as reconstructive, renewed, and transformative. The transitional meditators induced from the data analysis were heightened and intense. Transitional experiences reflected bonds of kinship with long-term foster carers, amid varying intensity of separations from other care placements, and from which a manifestation of other transitions and reflective mediators on relatedness would occur. These analytical mediators supported the work of Holland and Crowley (2012) that unearthed an alternative view on family trajectories and transitional rites of passage. In exploring the narratives of young 'care leavers' from a family sociology perspective, Holland and Crowley highlighted the force of emotions in felt kinship with birth families overtime. With respect to findings associated with these metaphors, despite phases of separation, liminality and possible integration, transitional rites of passages presented as enduring or circular webs of transition occurring across the 'youth' phase, representative of giving rise to fluid family and individual identities (as such, loosely integrated types of transitional experience). However, the nature in which this proliferation presents is of course complex due to variance in family

trajectories. Moreover, additional complexities arise due to the context in which transition-related change is experienced.

Even with transitional experiences that were cyclical, involving repeat separations from family displays before a transition to or from a long-term foster care placement, intense mediators enhanced adaption and reflective meaning making. A heightened sense of transitional control was evoked in present narrations. However, this sense was expressed in terms of surviving the 'system' amid contesting building relations with social workers, as they are not perceived as working in their interest and asserting their wishes. It seems reconstructive transitional dynamics in particular, centred on long-term foster family units and fewer transitions within a care trajectory, allow for heightened manifestations of control over future anticipated transitions. Relations with social workers who did not successfully arbitrate contestations of transitioning, and so mediate their anticipation over the transitional experiences, did not help intense expressions of affective adaptations. Contestability about transitional experiences in care, and their representations as a 'care leaver' holds significance, but these transitional mediators channelled strong affective adaptation.

Family transition was ascribed to mental recalibration about what is now anticipated - rather than who had control over family separation - with some young people suggesting that during their care trajectory that had recourse to arbitrate their own care placements and

separation or imagined ideal family transition. Metaphors of reconstruction, renewal and transformation denote relationships forged with long-term foster carers allows for a level of mediation that means reflections on separations from family displays show affective strategies expressed as surviving and resistance to labels of vulnerability. These strategies were highlighted upon initial entry into care and when transitioning from the long-term foster placement, and were reflective of reconstructive metaphors at junctures in which transition may occur. Long-term foster carers helped with affective adaptation to separation from previous family displays inciting elevated sense of recalibration about family separation and treatment from birth parents. Reflections on relatedness following separation from family displays highlight new families have the promise of a 'second chance at life'. These reconstructive transitional metaphors also highlight a level of resolution about past family, whilst relationships with distant kin remain a high affective-level commitment, especially with separated siblings. This felt kinship commitment heightened into the present, all due to intense reestablishment of family forms, indications of guilt that notions of relatedness are reformed, or indeed that they were 'lucky' to form kinship bonds within a new family. It is at the point of the dynamic involving signifiers of independence that the comparability between these three transitional metaphors – and therefore transition biographies – transpires (to be discussed in Section 9.4).

9.3.2. Transitional mediators and reasserting control/constrictive transition

Three transition biographies' transitional metaphors reflected reassertion of control or were constrictive. These induced permeable mediator forms between the separation from family

display and affective adaptation/ascribed meanings dynamics. The contestability mediator bridging separation from family displays and affective adaptation to transition/ascribed meanings of transitional variance were emphasised to a low degree. The three young people had entered care during or beyond adolescence, none had transitioned from a long-term foster care placement but two had experienced one. The permeability of these mediators, however, is mostly explained by the intensity of other trajectories during periods of separation from family displays. A lower commitment to reflective relatedness during times of transitional remembrance highlighted linked expressions of affective adaptation during transition occurring through own self-focussed and realistic representations of what a family should be. This lay in contrast to the romanticism of kinship that was evoked across the previous transition biographies. Notions of care fatigue consolidated the transitional metaphors of reassertion of control and constriction. The young people had reflected starkly on a multiple affective adaptations occurring, not solely a reflection on a high number of transitions from family units, but more to do with how momentous the separation from family in the teen years and permeable notions of relatedness due to a proliferation of uncertainty.

9.3.3. Regressive and fortuitous transition and their mediators

Regression and fortuity signified the transitions induced from five transition biographies, accentuating the fragility of transitional mediators. Notions of relatedness were tightly bound to strong senses of transitional contestability; this proliferates into fragile meditations between separation from family displays and affective adaption. The ascribed meanings attributed to notions of kinship are linked to contestation about non-separation from the

family unit in question, with each of the young people expressing their transitions were regressive or fortuitous because the state or local authorities were mismanaging their cases, and so a separation and transition to a stable family unit was not occurring or disintegrated. These fragile mediations compounded held notions of relatedness with mournful reflections upon being separated from siblings coming through narrations within these transition biographies, this again reflects the intense connections between contestability in family separation or non-separation and affective recalibration linked to relatedness.

9.4. Transitional mediators and expressions within independence metaphors

The discussion will now turn attention to the expressed significance of the transitional mediators 'relational agency' and 'sense making'. This is the site of more diversion between the transition biographies, with the mediators being characterised by individuality and lived presence of relational displays. The degree of affective adaptation and articulacy, and potency of meanings placed upon transitional flux, is expressed in the transition biographies as underpinning held notions of independence. The findings highlight the significance of high degrees of relational agency to a secure sense of an independent self. A disjuncture therefore transpires between transition that culturally may epitomise adulthood, and those that may not (although may still have the quality of transition associated with experience and self-representation). More ethnographic understanding of the transition to adulthood - in opposition to standardised outcome-based event history measures – is evident but is relatively primitive and does not present as a new metaphor of understanding in the youth field. Therefore, comparatively few studies have concerned the 'subjective understandings

of adulthood as a self-attributed status' (Shanahan, 2000:684) (as this thesis sought to achieve through sense making of independence).

Thomson et al. (2002) identified two models of preceding adult independence that all young people may experience. The first is an individually centred model of independence, encompassing own perceptions and feelings of autonomy and maturity; and, a second is a relational model highlighting kinship bonds, which are inclusive of aspects of responsibility through family and friendship ties. This thesis suggests these modes of thought cannot be separated in an ethnographic/narrative appraisal of experience. A young person's kinship ties have significance in counterbalancing crises in the so-called liminal phase of transition identified in anthropological studies. Scabini et al. (2006) also discuss how family relations come under the spotlight during times of transition, as

> *…the exchanges between generations [reveal] themselves most emphatically during times of passage, when the family is called on to change its organisation and to disclose its strengths and weaknesses (Scabini et al., 2006: 15).*

Scabini et al. (2006) further highlight a preparatory phase to transitioning (micro-transition) and an actual transition that a young person will enact in the subsequent phase (macro-transition). It is during these phases that kinship bonds are put to the test and heightened. Particularly during the preparatory phase, as the relational aspects of transition can encourage or inhibit transitional experience. The findings from this study suggest that the

prominence of mediators linking to sense making of independence is likely to contextualise whether a macro-transition - highlighting the promise of desired change - is experienced.

Relational agency expresses itself within the transition dynamic as scope to assert sense of resolution about felt kinship, and who is included as representing 'family', so to harness strong forms of relatedness in transition. The sense making mediator presents as existing within a relational realm, but also highlights the individuality of the transition biography, and the connective mediators towards how notions of independence are articulated and explored for future transition. The plurality of sense making in relation to notions of independence and relational displays were presented across the findings chapters. As such, this section will instead turn attention to how heightened, permeable or fragile mediator forms between the first two transition dynamics can deviate or proliferate in their expression between the second and third dynamic (as before, these dynamics are presented in Illustration 6).

9.4.1. Secure independence mediations

The transition biographies through which transitional experience was expressed as reconstructive, renewed or transformative each highlighted heightened mediators between the first two dynamics. The strength of these mediators deviated between the second and third dynamic. Reconstructive transitional experiences displayed secure mediators about relational agency and self-signifiers of independence framing channelled metaphors for independence. These mediators interconnect with those previous as the transition occurs

upon a secure and renewed 'family' trajectory, through which the young people expressed high presence of relational agency linked to the recalibration of notions of relatedness. Young people who expressed signifiers of channelled independence were able to exert choices in the future, linking to their own developing sense of self and desires. They made their own choices within boundaries of what they felt they could cope with at particular times. Reformed families and detachment from post-care services supported this sense, as they highlighted they were not the site for long-term affective support that would be beneficial to negotiating their own independence. Their sense making linked to notions of independence being supported and *taught* - how their experiences had set the stall for their desire to succeed and channel their resources into forging their own lives.

9.4.2. Less secure independence mediations

As evoked from the findings of transition biographies expressing independence metaphors representative of self-construction and status change, the heightened mediators between the first and second transition dynamics deviated in nature to the relational agency and sense making mediators (which saw less secure forms than those experiencing 'channelled independence'). The transition biographies of these young people highlight the elasticity of relatedness at times of transition, particularly amid various care transitions along a trajectory. Therefore, there is a fraying of expressions of relational agency, or a sense that this is being rebuilt due to a chance to form relationships with others. Alternatively, following each transition, there is an entrenched sense of self-definition in relation to family

or indications of self-constructed forms of independence forged through multiple transitioning.

Here we also see some temporal dislocations influencing signifiers of independence, with some earlier than anticipated transitions from care belying the relational agency built with some carers and birth family members. Still, with independence represented as self-constructing or status change unresolved heightened contestability can resurface in relation to the 'system' influencing the sense making mediator and enhancing construction of independent-like identities. Evident are different forms of relational agency that represent a break from held notions of relatedness towards independently forged relationships with others, these signified changes in status but also highlighted a battle with levels of affective commitment to previous 'families'.

9.4.3. Permeable independence mediations

The permeability of mediators acknowledged within the transitional biographies of young people experiencing reassertion of control over or constrictive transitions remained so. The transition biography underpinned by metaphors of reassertion of control in expressions of transitional experiences proliferated into responsibilised independence, stimulated by breaks in self-definition about birth family members existing as networks of kin into the future. Permeable mediators also channelled curtailed expressions of independent sense making due to the instability of colliding experiences upon other trajectories. The independence self-signifiers of transition biographies expressing forms of pseudo and hyper-

dependence transitional experiences reflected constant fragility of the mediators. Such a fractured care trajectory and various degrees of scope for affective adaptation helped by foster carers or key workers meant the sense making of these young people was framed in a redemptive sense against the care system, or mournfully due to time lost or a lack of support in relation to rekindling bonds with birth families. The care trajectories of these young people were therefore mirrored in their lower degrees of relational agency and struggles with sense making, and the associated mental recalibration that should occur that allows them to forge channelled independence sooner.

In essence, the variance in sense making mediations emphases how transition can invoke identified routine events, inspiring key moments, as well as turning points, all providing a period of evaluation if considered significant. Therefore, transitional experience is not always consummated through an easily measured act of transcendence and recalibrated sense making of the past. As a corollary to this proposition, Petch (2009) highlights that identities may remain constant, but the need to experience multiple transitional negotiations between different institutions may evoke a degree of anxiety, upon which a status shift would compound individual stress. This stress is particularly marked through response to experiencing abuse or unanticipated occurrences that precipitate a life transition. Whilst the definitional quality of transition may suggest discrete or singular movement from A to life event B, they are in essence life processes resulting in 'qualitative reorganisation of both inner life and external behaviours' (Cowan, 1991: 5). As such, a transition should be considered to be a dynamic process 'rather than a single event' one

involving ‘a period of adjustment and recalibration’ (Petch, 2009: 1). Transition thus involves a period of social adaptation requiring also reorganisation of behaviour, role or psychological functions. This lays emphasis on the differentiated impacts upon the trajectories of individuals as being dependent upon the situated lived complexity in which transition(s) was experienced. This following section will further emphasise the aspect of integration through consummation of a form of social recognition, this aspect embeds the significance of a ‘transition’.

9.5. The mediator of integration and consummation of social recognition

This section highlights how a notion of integration transpires within the transition dynamic, and how this may or may not be consummated through some form of social recognition. In doing so, it will directly deviate from van Gennep’s (1960) thesis that social integration forges the becoming of a new status. Instead, the findings suggest social integration is consistent with the independent self in relation to social pathways. Integration is also strongly suggestive that young people are defining their own platforms of integration and rituals consummating their held signifiers of independence. The original forms of integration that emerged from the findings are represented as follows: ‘Integration’, expressed as desired movements towards change is occurring through an identified transition(s) process. ‘Reintegration’, a return to a previous ‘state’ is occurring leading to further transition. ‘Disintegration’, whereby transition dynamics have led to worsened experiences. These forms of integration are mediators to whether forms of material or symbolic social recognition will be present. This recognition may represent strong or weak forms, and is

desired or undesired. The findings have highlighted that forms of integration are not always socially consummated (through a rite of passage initiation). In this sense, classic notions of integration in an anthropological take on transition would subsume young peoples' sense making and individuality in view of their experience as liminads.

This thesis herein suggests a reframing on liminality reflecting greater appreciation of meaning making narratives of life as a cultural liminad. It also highlights how implausible it is that the integration threshold into a new desired status is experienced uniformly amongst young people. For example, the concept of parentification (with children or young people assuming the role of a 'parent') can proliferate into a *rite of passage* into assuming an independent identity. Hedges (2011) explored family-related habitus as a connective theme with parental substance usage, and young peoples' initiation into drug abuse, as representing their rite of passage of integration into independent identities. However, there is an unclear understanding of less problematic initiations as the youth experience is dichotomised between success and failed transition, rather than through a focussed appreciation of the complexity of lived lives. This presents as problematic as not all forms of integration are recognised through mechanisms of social support, but present as potentially unstable transitioning patterns. Some exemplars of these forms of integration will be overviewed below.

9.5.1. Transition biography and forms of integration

Transition biographies aligned to both channelled and status change-related metaphors of independence highlighted degrees of integration whereby transitions encountered were reflective of negotiation of desires for the future, or reintegration into significant status shifts, such as becoming a parent. How these transitions are shaped as integrative reflects notions of held relatedness and relational agency being strengthened through long-term carers or resolve about who is kin and where the sites of sincere support are. Channelled independence forms are most likely to be socially consummated as they reflect educational pathways and 'independence' from services and mainstream notions of family support being available. Self-constructing metaphors of independence reflect transition biographies that have accumulated in reintegrative transitions occurring into the present. In particular, with the young people each expressing the importance of re-establishing close relations with siblings or extended birth family members. Desired future transitions expressed by these young people emphasised the ability to self-construct own future trajectories, a sense of self projected into the future that highlights future transitional experiences will be more monumental. However, into the present, there remain signs that reintegrative transition will occur in relation to birth families, showing that transitions are not always reflective of forward momentum.

The lack of dynamic forward change in terms of transitional experience is also present in integrative-stasis, whereby equilibrium has been reached and transitions do not represent monumental change, but continuity with recent transitions. This form of integration is

highlighted well within responsibilised independence metaphor within a transition biography, where mediators have gradually become strengthened and other non-social work-related modes of support have surfaced. Alternatively, the responsibilised nature of the transitional independence has meant that transitions have been experienced within a structure of self-defined independence linked to choice of career trajectories, independent living and relationships. Signs of disintegration surfaced within transition biographies that reflected curtailed, hyper-dependent and pseudo-independent manifestations from transitional experiences. Induced from these biographies is a requirement of support whilst entering independent living as their independent identities have not been harnessed to the same degree as the other transition biographies. Here we lay witness to more immediate needs the young people possess to support future transitions relating to their own visions of independence (possibly involving supportive or therapeutic input) and to help channel their talents and abilities in various desired directions. A lack of social consummation regarding their life directions was recognised, with contestability now proliferating in relation to current levers of support, amid an inability to move forward from care experiences due to variance in degrees of affective adaptation being enabled.

9.6. Discussion summary

This penultimate chapter has discussed how the findings contest the notion that transition presents as a time in the life of young people through which identified steps towards adult independence occur. Transition is not a state of becoming, nor self-actualised by the young person on a path to independence. Instead, transition is a relational dynamic deeply rooted

in the biography. Transition is a self-interpreted abstraction of a myriad of experiences attached, through story- telling, to lived or desired realties embedded in the past.

The young peoples' sense making of their transitional journeys indicate much variance in held notions of independence. The findings highlight that transitional experience at points within the biography proliferate across the life course into, as this thesis posits, metaphoric symbolism about held notions of independence. These notions are tied to meanings attributable to transitional experience, intertwined notions of relatedness, and aspects of individuality a young person seeks to stamp onto their past reflections and future life course. A caveat presents that transitional experience, and the degree of missed opportunity for mental recalibration (or 'support' for this), which can be enabled in times of transition, can hinder how these frames of reference for desired independence (tied to both need and individuality) are harnessed. Therefore, the locating of meaning derived from transitional experience is helpful in fine-tuning conceptualisation of 'transition'.

Particularly vivid is that young people may retrospectively assign significance to particular transitions and thus identify their own measures of independence. Melucci (1989) suggests that 'nomads of the present' is another metaphor usefully applied to understand contemporarily salient biographical orientations. In essence, nomads of the present would realise the significance of their orientations after the transition(s) rather than in planning for them to happen. A living in the present, for the moment, orientation would not place emphasis upon advancing towards the frontiers of adulthood, but would avoid prescribed

life projects in the long term. The shaping of the youth experience as understood through life course modes and youth sociology can render young people as being *lost in transition*. However, ambiguous temporal orientations do not necessarily lead to a sense of a disenfranchisement with the future. As Woodman (2011: 126) posits, future uncertainty is likely to act at an 'affective level' and so experienced to differing degrees. As the findings have suggested, overcoming anxiety of the future is enveloped by interaction with kinship ties and the ability to reflexively develop practical and emotional strategies.

An important adjunct to this discussion is that, for contemporary youth, lived experience occurs upon a series of competing trajectories, wherein an actual transition suggestive of integration may or may not have been negotiated. For instance, Molgat and Vézina (2008) explored the relationship trajectory within Canadian young peoples' biographical accounts and found a variance in the transition experience within the relationship sphere. They found discontinuities in this trajectory was reflective of significations of solo living was, to the young people, representative of either a reflection of a youthful lifestyle they wish to embrace, a period of transition towards entering a conjugal relationship, or long-term life plan. They therefore highlighted how particular biographies can be interpreted as 'transitionless' within the relationship sphere (Molgat and Vézina, 2008). This confronts life course perspectives that are predisposed to hone in on normative transitional patterns (and forms of social integration).

Transitionless biographical orientations helpfully counteract youth study's traditional focus on the enactment of recognisable transitions as a key determinate towards accomplishing adulthood (and measureable degrees of social inequality placed upon experience). With this in mind, however, Molgat and Vézina (2008) highlight that broader economic and social change has a place in normalising single living and undermining the place of cohabitation as symbolically existing within the youth phase. This thesis has taken this perspective forward and developed a 'transition biography' incorporating facets associated with inducing self-signification of transition in the purview of relatedness. The analytical facets to the transition biography has shown personal sense making constructions of independence are significant to how the young people in the sample were able to move forward from the past. This sense making process dominated the narratives, as opposed any emphasis upon decision making.

A sole consideration of whether traditional transitions, enacted through decision making, have occurred within a trajectory phase in question ignores the observation of alternate transitional experience. Young people may actually self-identify with having encountered transition within the relationship sphere, for instance. Alternate understanding of independence is pinned to relational agency, and reforming or shunning relationships with birth family or reforming own notions of family. These dynamics often require a high level of felt kinship at an affective level, meaning 'leaving care' processes are a misnomer. The dynamics associated with non-traditional 'dependence' upon kin into adulthood are observable in the field, in an experiential sense, as 'reverse transitions' (Charbonneau, 2004 in Molgat and Vézina, 2008). However, the findings do not provide empirical evidence of

reverse transitioning ‘patterns’, more a variance in forms of integration representing the nature of a transition. Conceptual labels of this nature focus more upon outcomes, following a slipstream towards independent living, rather than the dynamic of held significance of transitional experience. The following concluding chapter will consolidate the themes drawn out across the discussion and articulate how the empirical study has addressed its guiding aims.

CHAPTER TEN - CONCLUSION

10.1. Biographical relatedness: Revising the metaphor for youth transition study

Sections 10.1 to 10.3 will conclude the thesis by emphasising the contribution of the empirical study to policy thinking and youth study. This will be discussed in view of the knowledge gaps identified in understanding the relational quality to a young person's biographical account of their transitional experience. The contribution will be emphasised through the study's aims. These aims guided the development of two concepts: the transition biography, a methodological and analytical device to exploring the dynamic of transition; and the transition jigsaw, a contemporary anthropological frame derived from the findings highlighting the dynamical quality of transition and independent sense making. This section will proceed in discussing the first aim that sought to explore the sample's expressions of sense making towards 'adult' independence. Overall, the section will discuss the importance of a sensitive framework consistent with young peoples' independent identities that is supportive in the context of their lives.

10.1.1. Contesting cultural typifications and misleading trajectories in policy

As emphasised across Chapters Two and Three, policy and youth study are insufficiently appreciating the intricacies of contemporary biographies and transitional experience. This presents as claims made about the agentic scope of young peoples' independence. The transitions that youth encounter are largely scrutinised in the context of prevailing

institutional norms and expectations. Whilst policy approaches aim to guide young people to social integration and citizenship via careers advice, education and training, and labour market policies, they can ultimately reproduce problematised notions of youth. These claims pinpoint the politically endorsed promise of seamless social integration into adulthood, one that risks emphasising 'misleading trajectories' to contain the behaviour of 'youth' (Walther et al., 2002; Weymann, 2003). An apparent expert stage-management of transitioning deemed risky, and potentially a vehicle of social harm, is responded to in policy via different interventions to support the experience of transition and facilitate independency. However, this study adds to a rising chorus of concern that lost within these approaches, which focus upon institutional imperatives, are the views and perspectives of young people in contemporary society.

It has become apparent that the ascent, and primacy, of biographical negotiation within the youth field has an identifiable internal paradox to its claims. A body of literature spearheaded by Arnett's (2000; 2004) 'Emerging Adulthood' thesis suggests the contemporary youth condition is indicative of a temporally protracted life phase, wherein young people are able to experience freedom from the constraints of adult roles. The claims that youth exists as a period of self-discovery and independent identity formation are tempered by alternate arguments emphasising the pressures of an uncertain future that requires taming. An uncertain future is thought to be worsened by a social investment state orthodoxy, which focuses upon a process of responsibilisation and expert stage-management of transition to deviate from behaviour identified as risky (Lister, 2003; Kelly, 2003; France, 2007). Policies framed to guide the active negotiation of these stages exist 'in

a manner deriving from developmental psychology' (Jones, 2009: 110). These framings emphasise young peoples' outcomes relative to peers, this endorses the arbitrary construction of success and failure. However necessary, research emphasising localised impacts of socio-economic inequality, or broader cohort trends using large-scale data sets, exhibit a weighty focus upon how young people require placing into a resource-rich space to facilitate their social mobility. The nature of this empiricism somewhat sustains concern for desired outcomes. Transition, consequentially, is an experience prescribed at particular turning points in the youth phase that young people should successfully navigate at key times to reach independence. A renewed metaphor for understanding young peoples' lives is urgently required.

The experiential complexities and relational dynamics involved in sense making of independence, as drawn from the findings and discussion, strenuously contest the validity of the aforementioned policy impetus. The young people in the sample were not transitioning towards an imagined future whereby the realisation of adulthood would confer the social recognition that would 'rubberstamp' their youth experience. Indeed, the findings highlighted a rich variance in notions of independence. Self-ascribed independence was tied to differing expressions of whether transition had enhanced the ability to experience desired or undesired adaption in their personal and social worlds. Moreover, in its application to the youth phase, the concept of transition does not typify a youth period, as it is want to in the literature, as youth is a life-style rather than a chronological phase of staged transitions (Miles, 2000). Indeed, transition being conceptualised as a characteristic of a series of

momentous events at key threshold points are paradoxical; they are ambiguous dynamics grounded in equally ambiguous cultural notions of typical 'adult' maturation.

Youth is discursively cast as a time period where young people transition towards the relative stability of adulthood, leaving understandings open to problematisation. The discursive casting of youth as a period of transitional flux is unhelpfully accentuated by the inarticulacy of 'transition'. This inarticulacy inhibits further understandings of care-experienced young peoples' experiences as their transitions perceived to be particularly problematic. Their youth experience is assumed to entail periods of risky flux towards premature independent living, without the ability to remain dependent upon family units as mainstream young people may. The findings highlight that transition may indeed involve a sudden shift in identity; this is consistent with unprepared independence. However, youth transitions may or may not be characteristic of linearity according to particular trajectories, or representative of a timeframe through which independence can be brokered. There is simply too much conceptual ambiguity to make these empirical claims in youth-related research.

The findings demonstrate that transition consistent with status change may be experienced amid shifting relational contexts, maturity, individuality, or more obviously resulting from change stimulated through the institutional context of care and 'family' unit adaption and displays. Moreover, the metaphors for understanding meanings ascribed to transition and independence actually highlighted the plurality of experience amongst this group of young people (even though they may experience common trajectories). Despite this reasoning,

care-experienced young peoples' outcomes will arguably continue to be monitored as a cohort in order to forestall troubled transitions through policy into practice.

10.1.2. Coming from the middle?

Of recent years, there has been a growing consensus within youth study that policy and research gives primacy to examining the youth phase amongst cohorts who are vulnerable to social dislocation resulting from socio-economic disadvantage. The overall thesis is supportive of the claim that there is lack of understanding on the heterogenic nature of youth experience. To this end, the thesis argues for a developed understanding of notions of transition and independence that appreciates the relational interconnectivities within a given 'youth' culture. The thesis additionally argues that despite empirical work supposedly giving primacy to the experience of vulnerable cohorts, their lives are closely matched to the problematic nature of their situated contexts, which does little to advance knowledge of their perspectives. The findings highlight how, despite discourses of vulnerability and risk being matched to the experience of care-experienced young people, situated contexts splinter according to relational agency and aspects of individuality. It is argued, therefore, that the 'missing middle' of understanding regarding the 'ordinary' experiences of young people is valid (as reflected in the thesis of Byrne, 2005; France, 2007; and, Roberts, 2011), but the nature of transitional independence requires further empirical study.

It has been proposed within this thesis that understandings of foster care-related transitions are anchored within existing discursive levers regarding children, young people and youth *at risk.* Thus, the experiences of these young people are not readily matched with transitional

roles associated with mainstream youth. If transitional role types are denoted, the experiences of youth as transitional flux may be more (unhelpfully) accentuated. Yet, it can be deduced that young people who have experienced care are also part of a wider youth culture and experience a variety of trajectories linking to forming friends, extending their education, becoming parents, and so on. An alternate understanding relating to the 'ordinary' trajectories associated within the 'mainstream' youth phase, or the overlap of different trajectories experienced within this life course period, may be lost with meaning making from transitional experience silenced. The shifting academic focus between the vulnerable and risky, the 'missing middle', and the extraordinarily successful in the broader field of youth study, somewhat compounds the conceptual problems relating to transition. It seems these arguments delimit the potential to offer an articulate appraisal of the overlaps and departures regarding transition-like experiences, and expressions of the plurality of independence observed amongst young people in contemporary society.

The thesis has shown that in a quest to position the theoretical study within the broader field, there remain stunted conceptions about the dynamic of transition to which the youth condition is conflated. Youth as a concept reflects a period between adulthood and childhood through which independence is measurable through typical relative markers, usually linked to roles ascribed to people across the life course. These markers of youth independence are culturally, socially, politically and economically contingent. As such, there seems little sense in empirical work that attempts to conflate these markers with the identification of 'transition' experience(s). This thesis has sought to contribute to these debates in highlighting transition to be relational process; therefore, a transitional quality

may not have an 'observed' outcome. The individual decides if the transition has meaning in their lives. All young people are want to experience pathways, as they may be socio-legal pathways in a given social policy context. However, a micro-analysis of the experience of transition highlights that young people *perform* their transitional experiences differently. The family displays of the sample ultimately enmeshed their transitional experience and sense of a desired independent future.

10.2. The dynamic of transition: The importance of relatedness

The previous section has explored how the sense making facet to the study produced understanding about the futuristic dynamic of notions of independence. This section will conclude the second aim of the study that sought to explore the meanings the sample ascribed to transition. This was achieved through sensory ethnographic life story work that drew on the narratives of the past, bringing the meaning making of transition into the present. This section will highlight how the development of a contemporary anthropological frame for understanding transition can help bridge the gap between macro and micro-level studies of transition. Empirics of this kind embed transition in terms of how policy impetus can influence transition, and how the individual navigates transitional experience through his or her own agentic reasoning. However, anthropological understanding of the grounded experience of transition in view of cultural contexts draws out the importance of the young person's social context to transitioning towards independence.

The review of the literature pinpointed to the conceptual ambiguity regarding the concept of transition, the development of a transition biography and its associated 'interconnective'

facets sought to help fill this knowledge gap. This thesis argues that a so-called transition towards independence is constructed artificially. As such, notions of an 'independent' care leaver at particular age-ascribed junctures are unhelpful metaphors to which support is attached. The developed concept of a 'transition jigsaw' that derived from the findings highlights how the active 'negotiation' of transition is a reflective process, occurring post-experience of significant change or mindful recalibration of a young person's social experience. Transition is therefore founded to be dynamic consistent with multiple experiences, but the individual's retrospective recalibration ascribed to an experience embeds the meaning of transition. Thus, preparing for transition towards independence is a misnomer. This is particularly marked within the experiences of care-experienced young people whose transitioning is institutionally constructed and staged in terms of 'leaving care' protocol.

The experience of transition is currently conceptualised as a unit in a sequence of movements towards a perceived assumption of adulthood. These transitional movements are observed as if they are spurring and legitimising young peoples' motivations and aspirational reasoning and, in turn, shaping understandings of their 'youth'. Whilst these discourses bring agentic decision-making and action into view, they have equally stimulated debates in the youth field with a weighty suggestion that structural processes contain and render transition as risky, and so immobilise the young person's individuality. On the contrary, the concept of a transition biography that has developed in this study draws out how transitional transcendence embeds within the relational realm. A young person's sense of family and kinship has significance in how transitions are transcended across the life

course when liminal periods of flux are present. The limited literature (linking the embedding of relationality with youth and transition) suggests that it is within the relational realm of experience that agentic strategies are crucial to the forging of autonomous identities.

The findings counter the validity of studies that observe transition in terms of how the young person navigates particular trajectories, or have done in the past via accumulative outcomes. The youth as navigators metaphor for understanding experience is outmoded; and yet youth study is seeking to avert a 'missing middle' of understanding, through exploring the boundaries to young peoples' agency (in particular, those groups experiencing 'ordinary' transition). The developed concept of a 'transition jigsaw', which offers a contemporary anthropological understanding of transition, highlights the importance of inter-disciplinarity to developing the concept through which experiences can be further grounded. The findings highlight the importance of relatedness to understanding the transition dynamic, so recent debates in the field of family sociology pose a useful lens on the meanings young people ascribe to transitional experience, also keeping in view their individuality.

10.2.1. Exploring youth transition through the sociology of the family

Notions of family life may entrench 'senses of connection and belonging in ways that stand over and above the sense of being an 'individual'' (Edwards et al., 2012: 2). As the findings highlight, this sense of connection is present within narratives, even if the relationships ascribed through familial and kinship ties cease at some point in the life course (a finding supportive of the work of Finch and Mason, 1993; 2000). Therefore, one can reason that the

diversity of the family as a social structure leads to a multiplicity of contextually framed circumstances, each subject to individual re-evaluation and reconstruction in view of them. These contextual peculiarities thus counter-weigh the epistemological validity of individual agency and its presupposed expression as social action(s) (as per the thesis of Emibayer and Mische, 1998). Family displays for foster care experienced children and young people are enacted in the 'image of others' and, typically, delivered via a system of care spurring various trajectories and experience of family for each individual. The thesis therefore posits that caution needs to be exercised when discussing young peoples' reflexivity concerning relational agency. As reflected in life stories within this study, held notions of family and kinship are elastic, whilst also being temporally contingent. The lived reality of relationships is such they do not always offer reliable and consistent frames for agentic capacity to be that 'independent adult'.

The transition biographies showed how relatedness is less about family and kin functioning as a system, and more about the dynamics pertaining to relational support and commitment channelled through negotiated interactions. The young people reflexively 'negotiated' and recalibrated past, present, imagined or desired relationships within their narrative accounts of transition. These findings are placed in the context of expanding sociological discussion on notions of relatedness. These discussions draw out the idea that relational 'fixity' is tied to biological kinship affinities underpinning social belonging. However, developing a sense of social belonging into adulthood expands beyond the realm of family. Relatedness thus recognises that individuals display notions of family and kinship across day-to-day realities

that are ‘kindred in some way’ (Mason, 2008: 42). Appreciating young peoples’ held notions of relatedness and social integration requires a stronger appreciation that relational dynamics and experiences of transition displayed over trajectories are shifting. These shifts embed or reconstruct affinities held across time and space.

Understanding the relational quality of transition requires more than understanding the present everyday interactions and routines of family, as transitions occur within a temporal space connecting the past, present and future. Thus, a biographical perspective on transitional experience can evoke notions of relationality in the youth phase - as observable through ceremonies and rituals, particular family/domestic transitions - and involve dynamics leading to identity transformations or definite change. Young peoples’ narratives of family from a biographical perspective support a body of sociological literature relating to individuals’ active participation in family life, amid shifting dynamics across family trajectories. The findings turned attention to how young people experience family life across relational trajectories, not naturally in acquiescence, but as a self-selected support structure bounded by their reflexive thinking and agency displays (following the themes within the work of Finch, 2007; Charles, et al., 2008; Holland and Crowley, 2012; Kendrick, 2013). Young people construct, reconstruct and deconstruct their own meaning around kinship and biographical families whilst having the potential to employ relational frames of meaning with the wider community or professions working within the care system. Studies of this kind denote the expansive nature of a sense of relatedness held through the life course, and highlights the need for this gap in knowledge in the youth study field to be broached.

10.3. Reflections on the methodological contribution

This section will conclude the thesis in reflecting upon the third aim that guided the research. This aim sought to consider how methodological decisions could advance conceptual understanding of the dynamic of transition. As explored across Chapters Four and Five, the research incorporated a facet methodological approach that would orientate the empirical study to the inter-connective significances running through young peoples' narratives of their transitional experiences. This choice averted the analytical lens of a structure versus agency dualism that is prominent within the youth fields. As a research orientation (rather than a predefined process), a facet methodology enabled theory building using inductive frames of meaning of transitional independence drawn from the transition biographies of the sample.

In terms of the knowledge production, the participants' themselves were central to this exploration. The facets to the transition biographies were shaped with appreciation to enhancing the participants' meaning and sense making of experience through incorporating narrative enquiry and ethnographic principles. The participants' ability to self-define in view of linked lives, through the dynamic of relatedness, was essential. This process drew out their ideas of a future self, a narrated version moored in their relational contexts and meanings ascribed to transitional experience. The methodology provided the orientation necessary to avoid reproducing the idea that transitional independence, and the adult self, can be culturally typical.

10.3.1. Responding to methodological tensions in the youth arena

Formative reviews of literature highlighted how life course understandings of transition are mostly adopted as a methodology stimulating large scale, generational cohort studies of 'youth transition'. Studies of this kind are want to analyse, and empirically ground, 'experience' in the purview of event historiographies consequential to social change that has spurred proliferation of the *risk* narrative. These understanding have provoked a blanketed understanding of 'youth transition', through which the subjective representation and lived reality of either social phenomenon are not wholly traceable as narratives of experience. This lies distinctively in contrast to the new horizon in social theory, influenced by a post-structuralist turn, with the promise to elicit the creative agency a young person may possess that stamps their individuality and identities onto the experience of 'youth' (France, 2009). However, stasis in the field hinders understandings of the concepts of 'youth' and 'transition', in particular the ability to explore subjective understandings of what transitioning towards adulthood entails dynamically, and wider representations of what being an 'adult' actually is. The empirical tool of a transition biography, developed for the purpose of this thesis, sought to marry facets associated with both a young person's individuality and experience in the purview of their relational contexts.

A critical methodological incorporation of the sociological context, however, is worthy of consideration. Therefore, as I have previously suggested, the methodological tuning-in and application of the concepts of 'youth' and 'transition' are essential in how understanding is reached about how social constructs relate to lived experiences. However, in terms of

important systematic structural impacts relating to the transitional experiences of young people leaving care, these are not necessarily expressed explicitly. The young peoples' narrations within their transition biographies were very much embedded in their recalled and current lived reality. Transitional experiences were expressed at a personal, affective-level using reflective words indicative of sense making as a relational self disassociated from dominant 'looked-after child' or 'ward of the state' past identities. It is within the process of sense making, however, that the place and degree of systematic support is bounded to differing extents within particular narrative episodes or representations. The task was not to be blindsided by weighty social theoretical lenses. Brannen and Nilsen also observe this position:

> *Silence about the structural side of the dynamic does not mean it is unimportant in people's lives. Rather structure and context form part of the taken for granted aspects of life that are omitted from people's narratives and accounts provided in the research encounter (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005: 418).*

The methodological orientation of this thesis endorses the principle that binding concepts to sociological life course processes would not offer a holistic framework from which to understand the lives of young people. This thesis concerned itself with young peoples' narratives of their lives and notions of an independent self. The thesis introduced an inductive frame for considering the inherent dynamic quality to transition, a contemporary adaptation of anthropological understanding of youth transition that illuminates the social quality to young peoples' experiences. This thesis conceptualised transition as a self-interpreted abstraction that is attached to lived or desired realities. Through narrative

interpretation, experiential meanings develop and sense making occurs about the potential future self. In other words, transition is essentially a 'heuristic concept' involving interplay between individual meaning and social relationships in given contexts.

10.3.2. The fields of possibility in transition and youth-related research

The findings emphasise that current conception of transition offer limited value within the post-care policy and social work post-16 practice arena. Legislative frames for supporting transition(s) simply demarcate age-specific entry points when support is deemed appropriate to foster an imminent individual endeavour of independent living. This approach is embedded within an era of policy thinking giving primacy to social investment strategies amid retraction of monetary welfare support and refocus upon the viable 'family'. It remains difficult to discern, upon reviews of the literature, what insight social policy and social work practice frames are drawing upon in supporting the independence of young people. More ethnographically-minded research exploring the 'fields of possibility' in supporting young people would be useful. In particular, research that draws upon other multiple perspectives within the relational realms of the youth experience. A contemporary anthropological understanding of transition (which this thesis points towards) reminds us that the welfare of young people is bounded by their relational experiences within given socio-cultural contexts. Young people whose transitional experience have or may pose further challenges can require help with relational literacy, despite their narratives suggesting exceptional resourcefulness in recalibrating their sense of family and committing to broader relational displays.

The young peoples' stories suggest relational agency is crucial to gaining a sense of affiliation and recognition when 'family' is not an integrative aspect of the immediate future. In the context of cuts to governmental support services for young people, increasingly the sites of support are shifting typically towards the family or agencies offering inclusionary practice regarding education and employment pathways. This situation is accentuated by social policy and social work's preoccupation with child or adult services, which 'liminal youth' fall between. This thesis did not attempt to explain why care-experienced young people may have the outcomes they do. It highlighted, despite common care trajectories, the sample's heterogeneity in how their resolution, actions, creativity, displays of a relational self, and individuality are their own biographical mediations for their growing sense of 'adult' independence.

This thesis advanced the idea that supporting transition' requires biographical reflective space to be enabled. An inter-disciplinary frame for understanding transition has the potential to refract empirically the complexity of lives in transition. Ideas for a contemporary anthropological frame for understanding transition have already been advanced in this thesis. However, alongside a greater appreciation of the relational context in which youth experience is shaped and displayed, a developing body of work within the field of geography is applicable to advancing understanding of the experiences of contemporary young people. Geographical perspectives highlight the inter-connective nature to experience across the life course, with space, place and global territories helping to frame the lived realities of young people (for example, Hörschelmann, 2011; Schwiter, 2011). In reflecting upon the transition biographies that have been researched across England and Melbourne, an important global

and spatial dimension has transpired which recognises how memories of transitional experience are narrated and contextualised in terms of place. A 'macro' study comparatively researching aspects of the biography tends to encompass life course developments of cohorts and the interception of institutional 'structures'. However, the lived lives of the sample from across two global territories were grounded with respect to their immediate and previous homes and locales, the places within which their parents or other relations were located as part of a family history, and empathetic reasoning in relation to other children and young people globally (particularly those who have experienced care).

There was a sense that institutional experiences similarly spanned the territories, despite some recognised deviations in practice, and it was localised positive experiences of support workers that were drawn out of some transition biographies. Comparatively, studies of foster care systems are wedded to outcomes, these experiential nuances in peoples' lives are therefore lost. Whilst we must be mindful of the permeating social discourses that can problematise youth, a re-grounding of the concept of transition has been endorsed in this thesis. This should provide scope to explore the shaping of a desired independent self; a framing sympathetic to the degree of commitment required to recalibrate the past. This would entail a relational-biographical approach superseding the notion that youth transition involves staged momentum towards simply defined phase of adulthood that require political arbitration.

Biographical- narrative expressions of independence within this study have given rise to identifiable mainstream, relational, or individually ascribed notions of various indicators of

independent identities from a plurality of experience. Such an approach to understanding how transition can be supported may be applicable to other areas in which youth and transition are applied in social policy. For example, usage of transition and a prescribed need to foster independent identities is apparent within policies relating to transitioning from, or between, services within the youth justice and mental health fields. A relational transition model can offer understanding on the significance of relationships and the community to support young peoples' life changes. As nebulous as the concepts of youth and transition may be, they exist as necessary explorative terms representative of a proliferation of eventful adjustments (imposed or otherwise). These can present as tenuous tipping points in a life phase where transitional support for young people in ever-adapting contemporary societies may be required and sought.

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APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

[Template for coloured paper]

✪ **Project title:** Care leavers and the transition to adult independence: a UK/Australia study of responses to supporting young people leaving foster care

✪ **Who is carrying out this project and what is it about?** My name is Caroline Cresswell and I'm a PhD researcher based at the University of Melbourne's social work department. This project is exploring young peoples' experiences of foster care and how transitions from care can be best supported. I will be working with other young people like yourself, it is important that I hear from as many of you as possible to understand your experiences, views and concerns.

✪ **What will I need to do?**

- ✪ I would like you to bring to a meeting something important to you that represents your past and present life. This can be through drawings, photographs, music tracks, collages…anything you like!

- ✪ I will then ask you to discuss these items, to help form a life story. I will audio record what you say, and you will be free to change what you say or to exclude anything you are not comfortable being presented in my PhD.

✪ **What if I have any questions or do not understand something?** When you have offered to take part, I will contact you to introduce myself and arrange a meeting/phonecall. You will then have the opportunity to ask any questions about this project, and also throughout the process.

✪ **How long will the meeting last?** The meeting will last around 1 hour; it depends on how much you like to talk! Don't worry - you will have the opportunity for a refreshment break.

✪ **Will I be supported during the research?** Yes. Your personal well-being is very important. You will be supported in completing the research tasks, but also if the research makes you feel upset. You will be able to draw on the support of the

researcher, and your named support worker will remain in close contact at all times.

✪ **What happens to the information I provide?** The information you and the other participants provide will from part of my PhD research – a project I am working on until 2012. Any information you, or other care leavers, are happy for me to use will be anonymously presented in my PhD. Your experiences, views and concerns are important; I may use them within other written academic publications (though, your name will never be published).

The material you bring to the meeting may be photographed, with your permission. These photographs, may be put into my PhD. These will not be presented in the PhD unless I have your permission to do so. No photographs of people will be presented in order to protect their identity.

You are free to ask me at any time during the process to exclude any information you do not want presented.

✪ **Will people be able to identify me from the research?** Your support worker will know that you are taking part already, but your views will be confidential as your real name will never be used.

However, in some instances, I will be legally and morally obliged to put aside my commitment to confidentiality. This will occur if you provide me with information that may mean you, or your acquaintances, are under significant potential for physical or mental harm. I will also be legally obliged to provide information to the relevant people if you express that you are involved in activity that breaks the law.

✪ **What happens at the end of the study?** I will send you a report summary containing the views I received from you and the other participants, if you would like one. Again, no names will be included.

You will have the opportunity to contact the researcher after the meeting if you have any concerns or queries relating to the research.

Any information you have given me permission to use will be kept for a minimum of five years after my PhD is published, so to fulfill the University of Birmingham and Melbourne's Code of Conduct for Research. This information will remain anonymised.

✪ **What happens if I decide to not take part any longer?** Nothing. You will have a right to withdraw at any moment during the process. This is totally your decision and there will be no negative consequences to you withdrawing from the research. Your receipt of services and any benefits will not change if you choose to withdraw from the research at any point. Your relationship with your support worker will also not be affected. Additionally, no assessment will be made for your receipt of services or support due to your responses during the research, whether you withdraw or continue to participate.

If you withdraw, any recorded information that you have provided will be destroyed.

This research has received HREC ethical clearance through the University of Melbourne [HERC number; date to be inserted]. However, if you have any concerns about the study and wish to speak to someone independent, please contact: [details inserted]

Participation consent form (your copy)

I.....have read and understood the information sheet provided for this research project and agree to take part in the study 'Care leavers and the transition to adult independence: a UK/Australia study of responses to supporting young people leaving foster care'.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my involvement and the information I may have provided at any time, without having to give any reason, and without my social care, receipt of services, benefits, or legal rights being affected.

✪ Your signature.....

Date.....

✪ Researcher's name: Caroline Cresswell

Researcher's signature.....

Date.....

✪ Your contact details:……

✪ Researcher's contact details:……..

Thanks. Your involvement is very much appreciated ☺

Participation consent form (researcher's copy)

I.....have read and understood the information sheet provided for this research project and agree to take part in the study 'Care leavers and the transition to adult independence: a UK/Australia comparative study of responses to supporting young people leaving foster care'.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my involvement and the information I may have provided at any time, without having to give any reason, and without my social care, receipt of services, benefits, or legal rights being affected.

✪ Your signature.....

Date.....

✪ Researcher's name: Caroline Cresswell

Researcher's signature.....

Date.....

✪ Your contact details:……

✪ Researcher's contact details:……..

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE PROFILE

Pseudonym	Age at meeting	Place of birth	How recruited	Life story interview location	Sensory material
Alex	19	South West	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made/ information sheet emailed	South West - Skype™ session from participant's home	Digital drawing; showed various items, including artwork, trophies, photographs of karate class. As he was at home, impromptu discussion with 'foster' mother
Callie	18	North West	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made/ information sheet emailed	North East – local library, walking from library to train station	Family photographs and of foster family homes, gardens, foster siblings, pets across various placements and including her pre-care home with parents. Certificates of achievement, soft toy and present from father from childhood. Favourite music tracks from past. Website designed for college course. Writing from school work.
Charlotte	27	South East	Met at event, agreed to participate and details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet posted	South East - Local café, walking to second location, and library	Collages containing family photographs, pictures representing things hold importance/intend to achieve, photographs of other care leavers at events. Letters from birth mother, birthday cards, certificates
Emma	22	London	Met at event, agreed to participate and	London – local library	Facebook photographs – friends, family, and

			details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet emailed		places lived. Picture of London Underground map. Ring mother left her.
Eva	19	Midlands	Met at event, agreed to participate and details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet posted	Midlands – own home	Photographs of family and nights out, awards and certificates
Joe	23	South East	Met at event, agreed to participate and details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet posted	South West - local café	Family photographs, music flyers, self-penned 'raps', documentation/ID cards of time in YJS/treatment centre
Leila	20	North West	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made/informati on sheet posted	North West – own home	Family photographs, certificates of achievement, items brought for baby
Tori	22	South East	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made/informati on sheet posted	South East - Skype™ session from participant's home	Family, friends and travel photographs, information on where travelled via websites
Venice	19	Africa	Met at event, agreed to participate and details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet emailed	Birmingham - Researcher's University; walking from and to train station	Photographs of family, friends, travel (including childhood in Africa and return visit), items from childhood including care case records incorporating photographs, school/sport certificates, signed school shirt, scarf from grandmother, childhood toy, own artwork

Zafar	18	Afghanistan	Met at event, agreed to participate and details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet emailed	Midlands – own home	Photographs at home with friends, own photography work of various locations

Pseudonym	Age at meeting	Place of birth	How recruited	Life story interview location	Sensory material
Blake	21	Melbourne, Inner suburb	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made/ information sheet posted	Melbourne, Inner suburb – Local café	Photographs of family and residents of care homes. Care case records, documentation from social workers regarding staying healthy, etc., school reports, certificates of achievement, writing from school work.
Bronwyn	20	Melbourne, Outer suburb	Met at event, agreed to participate and details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet posted	Melbourne city – Office space of 'Agency 2'.	Photographs of debutante ball, and other outings with young people in the agency.
Elliot	19	Melbourne, Outer suburb	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made/ information sheet emailed	Melbourne, inner Suburb – Local restaurant	Photographs of family trips with this legal guardians, brother and girlfriend. Memorabilia from school and time travelling – most relating to sport.
Hayden	18	Victoria, Outer suburb	Details received via gatekeeper	Melbourne, inner Suburb –	Some interesting quotes noted that occurred whilst walking in vicinity

			and a phone call made, information sheet read over phone	Local library; walking part of the interview within his local area	of library.
Hari	19	New Zealand	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made, information sheet read over phone	Melbourne, inner Suburb – Local restaurant with his girlfriend and baby daughter	Video sent of a short documentary he produced of his experiences of homelessness. Care case records and a few photographs of important places. Baby daughter 'the future'.
Imogen	29	Melbourne, Outer suburb	Details received via 'Blake', adoptive brother, sanctioned by Agency 3. Phone conversation about study information	Melbourne, inner Suburb – Local café	None
Jessica	25	State of New South Wales – Rural township	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made/ information sheet emailed	Melbourne city – Place of work	Photographs of present family events and memory book of outings with 'Agency 2' and other children and young people. An article regarding a book containing an inspirational quote from another care leaver.
Kyle	22	Melbourne, Inner suburb	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made, information sheet read over phone	Melbourne, inner Suburb – Local café; walking part of interview to train station	Various family photographs of important events and places lived. Photographs of Scotland, where birth mother grew up.
Nicole	20	State of South Australia – Rural	Met at event, agreed to participate	Melbourne city – Office space of 'Agency	Photos of long-term foster parents and siblings. 'Thank you' letter written to foster

		township	and details provided, phone call made beforehand/ information sheet posted	2’	carers and poems written about feelings and dance. Dance memorabilia – collage and book.
Shannon	21	Melbourne, Outer suburb	Details received via gatekeeper and a phone call made, information sheet read over phone	Melbourne, inner Suburb – Local library; walking part of interview to train station	Photographic ‘memory book’ of ‘graduation’ party of lead tenant programme.

APPENDIX 3: VRM ANALYSIS, ALEX

First Reading – the storyline

Reading for the plot

As expressed by Alex, the main events in this story are founded upon notions of his life being a series of internal and external battles he has strove to overcome in his past and present, and how notions of controlling these are important to his future. The main plot of Alex's life story is underpinned by his narrated exploration of his past, present and future transitional trajectories and bounded by his philosophical outlooks. As he describes:

> *…it's all about how you change your past anchors which is things in life which have happened in your childhood that no longer serve you well…you recognise the anchor you've got there and you cut it off. You say I don't want that holding me back.*

To Alex, his first transition from the home of his birth mother into care was a choice he made to control his own circumstances and survive. Whilst in care up until his present life, his transitions have been aided through the deciding to join a Karate club and elements of spirituality form this practice which helps him draw perspective on his past and control his inner mental battle against negative thoughts and feelings. The planning of his future transitions is pinned towards winning these fights with himself and between relations and the system. In particular, he envisages self-managing his educational pathways as key to his future independence alongside the support offered from his former foster family, who he remains living with:

> *I want to move out when I'm 21 because I want to stay in education so that I'm well-supported. Because a lot of kids leave at 18 and they fall flat on their face.*

In drawing on his sensory material, Alex alluded to battle imagery and metaphors and how they represent '…my fight through life to get where I am today, to move forward'. The main plot is characterised by confronting these internal and external battles and triumphing against any occurrence in life that may obstruct his personal goals. Key features of his story are exemplified through the descriptive concepts Alex choose to portray his life story; these concepts are both explicitly and implicitly expressed. Implicit in Alex's representations of the past and present were

notions of controlling and suppressing external and internal battles, and surviving to win these battles. Alex consistently alluded to the need to be mentally strong and to draw perspective from negative experiences. He also restates the need for mental strength through his observations about the children he was placed alongside at various points in his placement with his long-term foster parents:

> *...it showed me, mentally, that there's a lot more problems out there than I thought…So, I said to myself I had it bloody easy because some people are so psychologically stuffed that ain't got a hope…It's like well, I'm glad I survived because these kids are distraught…They've gone through a hell of a trauma mentally…physical stuff can heal, mental is always there. That's why I remember everything that's gone on in my life from when I left my mother's house to when I got into that Police car. It's a mental thing. And that's what keeps me going, you know.*

With regards to Alex's future direction, he often attributed the need to survive, learn from and adapt as a result of bad experiences and to maintain a good perspective as to stay focused and get ahead - '…if you've got to fight, you've gotta win'. Alex explicitly mentioned how notions of his own independence has changed, whereby in the past independence was sought due to the need to take care of himself in response to his mother's neglect and his school's refusal to understand his circumstances. However, notions of independence now are attributed towards having freedom from the past; a fresh sense of independence to explore and not have the need for decisions that characterise transitions to independence forced upon him.

Reading for the subplot

Whilst the main plot is exemplified through overcoming life battles brought about through past and present life experiences, the subplot is best described through the nature of these conflicts with key characters in his past and present life. The subplot within Alex's life story is apparent in the contradiction between his expressed belief regarding the high degrees of control he had over the outcome of his past and present transitions and future life and, despite this, the need for support figures prominently at particular points in his narrative. However, the requirements of support remains contained in his narratives in the sense of acting as a channel to assisting his own decisions or make his future desires happen, or even to avert unsuccessful transitions away from his perceived goals or undesired lifestyle standards. In saying this, he reflects on a number of lost opportunities in which decent support mechanisms should have been in place as a matter of course, or times when key actors should have been responsive to his needs when he sought required support. In particular, he describes friction between himself and workers within education and post-care support services.

Alex often points to a lack of sincerity, honesty or competence within previous or existing channels of support.

There remains an underlying contradiction in his narratives regarding notions of support. Whilst Alex often dismisses the need for external support (other than his family base or through a particular teacher at College) and reflects on a series of battles he had overcome with particular individuals to pursue a future life with prospects, he also observes that other care leavers lack a direction, as he has, due to the failure of support services that are in place:

> *'They are like well, my life's crap anyway. If you can't help me, nobody can. So I might as well be a bum all my life, claim benefits and sit on my ass…you get the odd person who will go out there and strive, and do everything they wanna do in life. But, apart from that the statistics show that the support isn't there for people'.*

In a few images and metaphors he uses, Alex suggests that he gains the mental strength to pursue his life plans as a result of the existing support from his former foster parents, in terms of having someone there to help with the fight and advocate for him. Moreover, he mentions his philosophy is to deal with problems as they arise, as he concludes, these are 'little ways of managing my life'.

Reader response

I first spoke to Alex during a phonecall after being provided with this contact details through the gatekeeper. Alex had details of the research and volunteered to pariticipate. Alex had told me during the phonecall that he had informed his 'practice tutor' at College that he was involved in some research concerning foster care. Alex was told that his involvement would offer additional help towards a particular module concerning interpersonal and communication skills on his Business programme. He also mentioned that he had had a discussion with this tutor about how important it was to have research in this area. These aspects provided a good feel about Alex's involvement from the start due to his enthusiasm and well-considered prospective involvement. Alex likes IT and was taken by the novelty of doing an interview over Skype. Due to his physical location in a suburb in South East England we thought this would make things easier also. An online meeting occurred in winter 2010, before Christmas. Alex was at home during the research meeting. Alex had emailed a 'past, present and future' graphical illustration that he created in Publisher. The past, present and future years were distinguishable through various pictures that Alex chose to represent his life. Alex also mentioned particular music and film and used metaphors to describe the place in his life.

What struck me about communication with Alex and upon the first reading of the transcript of his life story was his resolve to understand his past and move forward from his experiences. I thought that at times that some of the narrative episodes irritatingly placed a little too much emphasis on aspects of resilience and mental strength on occasion, however, in many ways these aspects of his expressed character and narrative provided some insights into the experiences of foster care leavers reconciling past experiences. Alex expressed fortitude in his narrative of his past experiences and his keenness to reconcile the negative experiences he has had with a determined focus on the life he is seeking to build in the future. This is epitomised by one of his comments when he was deliberating about where to start his life story – 'I'll work at my past. That's always the best place to start. Then we can move forward'. A significant part of his narrative was taken up by his practice and teaching of Karate, I was perhaps quite open to listen about this as we both share an interest in martial arts. I was intrigued and taken by his sense of responsibility to his classes and the sensitivity in which he rebukes challenging pupils due to his former experiences with relations, for example:

> *…believe me, through coming up the years of being told I'm an idiot, prat, and everything else, it can have bad consequences…I don't know their backgrounds. So it's best not to tell them they are pratting about just in case they are told that every single day of their life.*

Alex also showed a lot of compassion for other foster care children he has lived with, and children and young people in care generally, however, he tended to set himself apart as he seemingly recognised that he was in a position he wanted to be in compared to other care leavers. He mentioned several times how care leavers are left to 'fall flat on their face'.

Reading the transcript also reminded me of the communication with his former foster mother, Mary, who unwittingly found herself involved in the research meeting when she came to collect rubbish from his room. Alex asked her to join for 5 minutes as 'she's got good ideas on care leavers', this unexpected encounter turned into a 20 minute dialogue regarding care leaver practice in the South West of England! It was very interesting to hear some of her experiences of preparing and supporting young people in leaving her care. But, it was also touching to see the interaction between Alex and Mary, especially in light of Alex's comments about the new and continued sense of being supported as a comparator to the state of flux and inconsistently that characterises his involvement with education and care services. As he describes:

> *I loved it, you know. Just having people in my life that can turn around and say 'well, we can't do this for you'; and having someone else turn around and say 'hang on a minute, yes you can. And this is how you're gonna do it because if you don't you're going to have problems'.*

Second reading – the voice of the 'I'

Reading for the 'I' in Alex's narrative was significant in tracing the personal interpretations of his lived experiences (his past) and their influence upon his identity formation as displayed in his present and projected self. Alex drew on the images within the diagram he developed expressively; this eased the process of gaining an essence of the person behind the narrative.

Throughout his narrative on the past an underlying perception of Alex is gained of someone who is strong-willed, yet his narratives also draws on a vulnerable side in which he admitted he felt unhappy when thinking about an uncertain future during his childhood. In tracing the 'I' in his narrative, Alex strikingly referred to his transition to foster care as being a consequence of his strength of character and enforcing his choice of which care placement would work best for him. Alex refers to elements of his character when describing his lived experiences and journey through his childhood, however, this is couched in how he has adapted his thinking and has overcome past traits he either deems negative in retrospect or others had recognised in negative terms, which is why he exclaimed that 'There's always two sides to a story…like they'll always be a reflection in the mirror'. He mentioned his need to have therapy during his childhood in care in terms of a need to change these character traits and so to not reject his new family and other significant people. However, he qualifies this in a later narrative and reasons about why he supposedly had dogmatic negative traits when he describes an image he included of a man on death row:

> *That's to represent how I was locked up in myself. I couldn't be free…People said I was self-centred…everything had to be my way…that was because I didn't have a chance to explore. Everything had to be the way I did it because otherwise I couldn't survive.*

Alex places equal emphasis upon taking up Karate in a way of surviving elements his past experiences and aligns this to subsuming past perceptions of self. He regretfully expressed that Karate was his missing something that he would have liked to have done in the beforehand and that he has 'missed out on'. Alex uses other descriptions and metaphors to express how he reconciled his past. In particular, he draws on an image of guns as an analogy for 'always fighting to find my way through life somewhere or other'. Feelings of having no-one to support him in the past and the need to fill that gap with Karate and significant other aspects of his life were also referred to in describing his past. Alex often describes his past self as being his former self. In particular, he draws on conflict with his primary school teachers when it arose that he was stealing money from his mother. This is an example of his need to defend himself and establish an alternate identity other than the more

disparaging one that was being formed for him. He tries to counter his memory of the labels that were being placed upon him:

> *…if you look at it through my perspective that's nothing compared to what my mother's done, you know, which means I've got bruises over me.*

Alex continued to defend his childhood self and suggested he was being smart and resourceful to overcome his difficulties and find ways of coping and looking after himself. He often explored the possibility that he was considered an 'idiot' as a child. Alex still continued to portray himself as a strong-willed character and most of his explorations of his past self were drawn on in ways to describe the transition from a child who has experienced abuse and the care system to where he is now in life, as he concludes after discussing his episodes of theft: 'I'm a stable person…It's like I've turned my life around…I don't worry. Life's good'. In addition to this, in another part of the life story he draws on how self-satisfying it is to confront people from his past and display where he has come in life and to be in the position to change their perspective of him.

In reflecting on another image containing question marks, there was a recognised contradiction in Alex's narrative and an unusual moment in which he displayed a lack of clarity over his circumstances and life course. There was a lengthy pause and pensive moment when he referred to the question marks as representing his inquisitive nature as a child and how he would seek answers that countered the litany of lies he felt he was told. Following the pause, he reflected on how seeking answers and how '…the question of life is why, for me. I still ask it about things now…that's just because I've never been able to find out why things have happened the way they have'. This was a turn in the life story narratives as Alex in the main had expressed complete knowingness about his past life and sense of self. However, whilst reflecting on an inherent need to address some gaps in his life history that he would like addressing, he almost maintained that notions of his independent self are tied to his freedom from his past. In later parts of his life story he states attending Church and being confronted with religious practices as allowing him to gain a deeper understanding of his past.

Alex presented himself as a virtuous and defiant character and his descriptions of his experiences went some way to underlining these traits. He places the fact that he was relatively older than most of the care population when he entered care and the maturity brought about by his independence as a means to draw perspective on his mother's abuse and why he was in care: '…I learnt very quickly that my mother can't cope'. Moreover, he mentioned his clear life plans and how he acted upon them through his own resolve. In a separate narrative that considers his present, he also acknowledges the private foster care agency for helping to fund his stay with his long-term foster carers and shows a political awareness towards his life course pathway:

...if it wasn't for [Agency 1], I wouldn't have anything…I would probably be in a flat, with a box room. With no friends. No course. And stuff all!...If it was down to elections and Every Child Matters, that's what would happen.

Alex went on to show empathy concerning the situations other care leavers' face; this supported his portrayal of himself as a considerate person but also highlights shifts in the voice of the 'I' to more generalised statements about him being a part of a wider group of young people, even though he admitted he spoke from an advantaged position from other care leavers and, in a sense, distances himself from them as his direct peers. Generally throughout his life story, the shift from the 'I' to 'them', 'they', and so on, allowed him to express his point of view and accentuate descriptions of his experiences, rather than offering anything to suggest his narratives were muddled or built on any confusion regarding his identity.

Another interesting aspect of Alex's life story came when his foster mum arrived, which will be drawn on in relation to Alex's responses to what Mary was discussing. Generally, Mary's discussions supported the self that Alex was representing in drawing on his past experiences, but she also helped him remember other experiences he had not raised. Particularly interesting was an experience he had with other children in foster care during a local authority-funded day trip in which there was so inequity involved in treats provided. Alex remarked '…everybody's got to have equality. They can't treat us differently'. Although Alex reflects that he now has a sense of independence and control over his future direction, he discusses any suggestion of a lack of independence to move away for university in more generalised terms in relation to young peoples' readiness to do so. Here his descriptions shift from the first person: '…some of them survive cos of their independence has taken them to that stage that it doesn't matter if they move countries – they will survive'.

In continuing to present himself according to his current life and future hopes Alex continued to draw on philosophical notions about bringing balance to his life and learning from the past. In drawing on elements of spirituality and religion, Alex at several points in his life story discusses the importance of having this base to understand his past and help support his future. In discussing going to Church and considering the spiritual nature of Karate he reflects: '…you can understand your importance and values and your personal aim for why you are on this earth. Alex again shifts from the voice of the 'I' but rather to enforce his perspective of these practices but also to describe what he draws his current and future sense of self from. As he expresses when referring to 'yin' and 'yang' images in his representation of the present, these spiritual elements bring equality to his life and allow him to be a happy person. Further, educational pathways were regarded as a stabilising element in his life that and for a sense of achievement in the future that he can strive for.

Third reading – reading for relationships

In reading for how Alex spoke of his relationships in his narratives inter-relations based on conflict and mistrust ran through his past representations. These narratives that drew on conflict with relations somewhat dissipated into his present and future narratives alongside references of the support received from his long-term foster family and the resulting sense of balance brought to any other conflicts, with services and such like, through his relations with his peers, Karate instructor and course tutor.

The central relationships within Alex's life story, which guides his narratives prominently, are those in his past with his birth mother and his current relationship with his long-term foster carer, Mary. Although Alex admitted to a sense of 'always fighting to find my way through life somewhere or other' in retrospect, his narratives drew on his relationship with his birth mother as core to those conflicts within his home and external conflicts with others outside of the home. With regards to his mother, at significant points in his life story he draws on incidences of emotional abuse and neglect, and the intensity of verbal and physical conflicts -'It was like bull-fighting all the time'. Alex reasons that the core of the issues relates to his mothers alcoholism and her inability to accept that he was an intelligent child with his own will. In speaking directly of how he first made the transition into care, he states he reasoned with a social worker to place him in a family environment – 'I said [to a social worker] 'you put me in a children's home, I'll commit suicide. You put me in a foster home, I'll be ok'. His narrative here suggests he desires a family environment, however, importantly, Alex was aware of his mother's and sister's background of care at this point and gathered that he would be better off in foster care and separated from his biological family than within this abusive home.

Consistently, special regard is placed on Mary, Alex's long-term foster carer who he remains living with. Mary is central to his narratives that reconstruct his sense of self and his role as a family member. Within Alex's life story, he refers to the how Mary's support was a crucial turning point in helping Alex to fully appreciate that his views and problems he is facing are legitimate. Mary discussed her interaction with post-care services due to the young people who were due to leave her care, had left care or Alex's circumstance. In how Alex 'bounced-off' what Mary was narrating it was clear that Mary is very much a staunch advocate for Alex and there is a strong 'partner in crime' ethos and mother and son bond. Mary's presence in the room towards the end of the meeting also confirmed how central she was to his life course. Alex alluded to a sense of balanced perspective in his life and stability in that he knows he can remain in Mary's home into the near future.

When he first came into foster care he acknowledges that he found it difficult to adapt to new personal relations that were to be based on trust and familiarity; he states that he required therapy to overcome his fear of family life. As time went on, despite various incidences he drew on of clashes

with foster siblings, he refers to his foster siblings as his 'brothers' and Mary's granddaughter as 'the little sister I never had'. Alongside Mary, Alex has helped his foster brother's upon leaving care, in particular helping them establish themselves in their independent accommodation. So, in these discussions of his siblings and his long-term foster family a sense of achievement comes across that he has built this family unit that he wants to be independent from when it suits him, not post-care or educational services.

Alex also drew on incidences of bullying he experienced at school, again highlighting the subplot of his life story as being underpinned through conflict. Interestingly, when Alex discussed bullying he also progressed to how he ended up in a more favourable position and triumphed again the odds. In particular, he mentioned confronting a girl that used to bully him and gaining much satisfaction in telling her where he was right that he would excel. In his narratives regarding other significant people, he alluded to positive relations with his Karate instructor, his peers at College and some people in his Church network.

Forth reading – considerations of the life story within the broader cultural and socio-political contexts

Alex presented the social context in which he was a child as one in which he was labeled as a rebel and difficult to handle by his primary school teachers. A sense is gained that the wider social context for children, as expressed by Alex, is that children lack reasoning skills and agency to want to improve their own circumstances. This manifested in narratives that suggested he had the wool pulled over his eyes and was 'lied to'. In terms of his conception of family, he aligns the abuse he experienced indirectly with wider social issues relating to alcoholism and inter-generational problems when he referred to his mother's experience of the care system. However, Alex's resolve grew from wider social and cultural contexts, in particular from the spiritual and religious elements he mentions.

In relation to markers of adult independence, Alex suggests that this is context dependent. In a narrative regarding the implications of leaving home for university he states:

> *…some of them [young people] survive cos their independence has taken them to that stage that it doesn't matter if they move countries – they will survive. Technically, I could do that if I wanted to, but it's not my sort of thing.*

In talking of his future hopes, Alex has a clear sense that education qualifications, alongside the support of his family, will stabilise him and bring him life opportunities. Alex is putting his faith into this course of action, however, he strongly believes that his options were not made clear to him and his ambitions were not fostered. Alex provides the view that he is self-motivated to achieve, he wants to have a high income and a wide network of people alongside this.

Alex's care order would have ceased following the introduction of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000) and the implementation of the Connexions services. Within his narrative he refutes the idea that post-care support workers or educational advisors have provided a bedrock of general welfare support or supported his aspirations, and hence aided his transitions. Alex describes at various points a lack of support for care leavers, in particular in relation to enhancing aspirations and instilling ambition. Alex has command over his educational trajectories and has a clear vision in terms of where he wants to be in life, however, he expresses a real sense of disillusionment with services frequently in his story. He refers to a particular lack of intuition regarding the plights of care leavers from Connexions services. He alludes to a sense of a state of default independence in which young people leaving care do not gain enough fostering or support of their aspirations and so align independence with striking out on their own without requisite systematic support. He points to how education-specific services are inadequate and can only help young people who fall into generic moulds.

Through his experiences, and witnessing those of his foster brothers, Alex does not attribute leaving care into 'independent living' with achieving the necessary stability: …care [has] two affects on people – they go in care and they either can't wait to get out, or they can't wait to stay, they are very stable'. Alex frequently muses and suggests that being left to the discretion of the local authority represents being alone and inadequately supported. Alex gained a sense of a lack of a support structure in leaving care that could help him at particular points in time. In particular, when he was completing his UCAS form and required the signature of a support worker in relation to his status as a young person in the care of his foster parents. In response to this request a support worker argued Alex 'must realise that I have hundreds of young people on my book'. Alex became combative and claimed '…if you sorted out one case properly you'd have less case work'.

Alex has withdrawn himself from seeking support from leaving care teams or following up on any entitlements. Moreover, Alex did not receive contact from the leaving care team and is alert to the fact he should of. As he narrates: 'They weren't much help when I needed them…it gave me a negative feel for who they are and who they are supposed to help'. This 'negative feel' has been engrained through his foster brother's experiences. Mary and himself refer to various incidences. Alex became animated in recalling an incident in which his foster brother was given the tools necessary for DIY in his independent living accommodation but received no help to make the necessary repairs even though he has Aspergers. Alex expresses that he was previously fearful of

being left without adequate support like his foster brothers or other care leavers, however, he expresses an equal sense of relief and contentment at being relatively stable. Most discussion that hint at a collective social and political identity for young people leaving care are bound in these terms. For instance, rather than discussing other care leavers in a collective sense, a group in which he is affiliated, he talks from a privileged position in which he observes how the system could and should offer support.

APPENDIX 4: VRM ANALYSIS, JESSICA

First Reading – the storyline

Reading for the plot

Upon reflection of the first reading, the main plot of Jessica's story unraveled in her explanations of her transient life course. Jessica's portrayal of her experiences of care and post-care is predominantly built upon her descriptions of the multiple transitions from her original family home up until the independence achieved in her own home and, thus, her story is guided by her transitional trajectories. As the research meeting commenced and mention was made of the life story approach as a reminder, Jessica presented an 'overview' of her life. This narrative included descriptive detail of her 'home' transitions which gave initial structure to the main plot – that is, transitions from the various houses she shared with her birth mother, and then into care placements and subsequent lead tenant programmes. This narrative also saw the start of the emotionally punchy labels 'daunting' and 'overwhelming' that she repetitively attached to her descriptions of her (and later those of others) experience of care transitions:

> *…my first placement was in foster care – so transitioning from that home into the next home was actually quite daunting and overwhelming because I went from a family home into a prison camp. It wasn't really a prison camp [laughter]. Do you know what I mean? So, that was daunting and overwhelming because I went to something that was set up quite nicely and structurally into something that was set up to be more of a facility, I guess, for young people in the care sector.*

Key to the portrayal above, and the features of this main plot weaving throughout the life story, was the 'voice' Jessica's used to draw on the experiential nature of her transitions; these expressions were of most prominence during narratives of both her own past life and those of her relations over time. In particular, she consistently referred to care, or the 'care sector', in such as way that suggested she was using the discourses and language embedded in her present professional and university life. Jessica's portrayal of life in care consistently veered in this sense, and so guided her presentation of her life story and so formed its main plot and influenced its subtexts. This language also extended to her reflections of her experiences of transitions to other care placement types; in this excerpt she describes her transitions from and to different care placements and highlights her *othering* of care children displaying traits deemed troublesome:

…living in that environment was really quite tricky and you found that you picked up a lot of bad behaviours...But, I was sort of quick to smarten up my act and outline that I wasn't interested in that, and was lucky enough to come across a lead tenant arrangement...And the transition from residential to lead tenant arrangement was actually quite a positive one because I got rid of crazy, psycho children to having my own sort of independence and my own sort of environment to be able to do as I would.

However, the labels used here to describe other care children were unusual within her life story as typically she adopted language reminiscent of professional discourses she is exposed to in her present work and university-related daily life. Thus, Jessica's reflections of the past were framed expressively as if she was a bystander *looking-in* on the 'care sector' and its clients. These portrayals became a key feature of the narratives; this meant her portrayal of her past lived experiences seemed dissociative. However, it was noted that her adoption of this more emotionally-charged language coincides within the narrative episodes relating to experiences or perspectives which were negative. During these occasions when Jessica's narratives of her transitions shifted away from professional language, it's recognisable that this occurred when negative memories of precarious transitions were being triggered and she was becoming emotive and reverting to semi-serious narratives. The following extracts from a narrative episode, encaspulating reflections on the family's role in supporting the transitions of young people, demonstrates this shift:

*Some people have got it easier. You know. have got lots of friends, are still at home at 27….they are not moving out anytime soon…they are comfortable. They are happy. They don't have a worry in the world…In some families…the support's there and it just seems to work. Then in other families, it's not. So whether or not it's going back to the root of the problem, or whether or not it's dealing with the current situation. This is also something they should consider; because it's mum and dad they should be putting in care [laughter]. Do you know what I mean? It's mum and dad they should be removing…and saying go to parents' camp. You have f*****d up generations of lives, like, you are going to learn for 12 weeks. We're not going to take the kids from you, but we're going to put you through hell.*

At particular points when the main plot diverted, like the above, it seems this derived from an impassioned belief that the ideology and practices of the care system require changing. This ideal is particular marked within the direction of the main plot which is founded upon a sense of continued disruption and transience that underpins Jessica's care placement trajectories. Directly after the sentence in the narrative episode above Jessica adds 'we're going to rip you in and out of places', again emphasising Jessica's disquiet at periods of flux that characterises care to her.

How Jessica employs language in her narrative episodes leads to variable patterns that make the interlinking of experiences of her past, present and future lives as expressed difficult to trace within the first reading of the text. On occasion, Jessica did allude to the past with respect to a direct reflection on her experiences retrospectfully as a child in care placements, albeit following blasé descriptions of foster care placements:

> *…either it [foster care] works and you become part of their family from there, or it doesn't work and you don't feel like you fit into that family and you have your dramas and those types of things. I felt I didn't settle.*

Jessica's explorations of her transitions were certainly guided by this sense of transience and instability due to movement from various family homes in her early childhood and the multiple and, as she deems, inappropriate care placements she experienced. However, in all, Jessica's life story representations were difficult to trace. Her descriptions of her life story and the transitions she experienced fly from the professional to the personal and insider and outsider expressions throughout her life story. However, still, this gave emphasis to her use of language that permeates her life story and charaterises, by proxy, her sense of self that could derived from this main plot. In narrations that encapsulated her future self, Jessica's portrayals became more fluid and the use of language more stable. The stability within the narratives regarding her future projections also taps into the main plot of her life story, with the chaos described in her past transitions and, in contrast, her future trajectories built upon a fresh sense of security.

Reading for the subplot

The main plot of Jessica's life story was apparent through her descriptions of her transitions and how the transient and insecure nature of these was expressed through differing 'voices'. This extended within the subplot which derived from various subtexts describing her experiences of care through narratives regarding the people she knew. Whilst Jessica's observations are still somewhat delivered through an organisational lens, either in her explorations of time spent with Agency 2 as a young person in care or from within her general post-care advocacy statements, interesting subtexts came to the fore that were peppered with relatively emotive recollections of people she knew that inspired her. The sensory material Jessica incorporated was central to triggering these narrative episodes that made up the subplot to her life story, in particular a photo album of memories of her time with Agency 2 whilst in care. As Jessica explained, 'care for me is this book'; this book contained photos of other care children on camps and support workers for the organisation, and also photos taken during a conference in which she presented in front of a Minister.

Underneath the continued language that linked to her appraisal of herself as 'quite a big advocate for them [Agency 2]', these photographs triggered narratives regarding a few pivotal moments in Jessica's past; as she recollects these events she states that they left an impression on her. Jessica reflected upon activities in which she 'had to trust people and be dropped into their arms' and have general 'kids' fun days', and that this was 'the very starting point, for me anyway, of entering a bit of the care sector. You know there was the negative and the positives, but I try to always take the positives out of things'. However, in considering the main plot and its related instabilities she experienced during her care placements, the subplot here signifies various happy memories and turning points that link to them and so becoming her expressed 'positives' from her childhood. In particular, she draws on a memory of what another child in care said to her during a dress-up occasion at camp:

> *…we all got these outfits and I met this little kid…he was the biggest troublemaker I ever met of a child in my whole life. He drove me insane the whole day. He would keep on trying to pull things off me, or strangle me with my scarf, or whatever. He entered care really young and he come up, I was named Wishy or something…I was sitting there in my own world…I know his background, he was removed when he was little because his mum and dad weren't providing for him, he was in a vulnerable situation da la la la. He came up, grabbed my leg, and said 'I don't know what to wish for. It could be worse. It's not that bad, is it?'*

Following this narrative, Jessica discusses how this represented some kind of turning point to her:

> *I just remember him from that day, you know. He's four and he's got that outlook, and I'm like I need to get up and do something with my life. Yeah, that was cool.*

In discussing emotive tales such as these the interesting subplot emerged, however, within these narratives she also reverted back to type and the professional and academic voice began to surface again. This is apparent in the narrative below in which she reflected upon a photograph of a girl who was also in care and of a similar age at the time, and 'who'd gone through a lot of trauma in her life and had lots of issues':

> *[I] reflect back on things and wonder where they are or what's happening to them. Some of them, Sarah, I still know. She's got married, has settled down and whatever else. And I don't keep in close contact, but I still try to keep in contact, cos normally the outcome of children and young people in care, as the statistics will show you, is quite negative. They get mixed into the wrong, you know, crowds, wrong groups, wrong environment, drugs and alcohol,*

homelessness. You know, those types of things. But, there definitely is a minority out there. I think anyway, so…

This narrative shows how the periods of her life story that drew on the inter-personal aspects amongst other care children and the touching stories she encountered were layered amongst the language that characterised the main plot.

Reader response

Jessica's contact details were provided via a gatekeeper after she responded promptly to the request for participants and details of the research. As Jessica's week was fairly full, and she had to cancel a weekend meeting, she invited me to her place of work out of hours after deciding this would best all round. Jessica was very affable and keen to take part. The meeting took place in a spare side-office within Jessica's workplace early evening in early 2011. Jessica was clearly very comfortable in this environment and was very welcoming. On reflection, meeting in Jessica's workplace, directly after a day's work, could possibly have influenced the professional approach Jessica took to the life story, with the more personal language where I got to know her better transpiring towards the end of the meeting.

Jessica also confirmed her willingness during the meeting in reasoning that discussing her experiences within research will assist in helping to increase understanding of the dilemmas she draws on. This confirmation followed a narrative regarding how dispiriting she finds it to know young people who have been in care becoming part of the statistics regarding bad outcomes:

That's the outcomes isn't it? That's what they tell people, that's what you read, that's what you see. You know… I want them to see positive. I want them to write in a positive way. Like, you can be like this, you can be like that. Or give role models. Or mentors. Or supporting people. Not shoving this in their face 24/7…You don't want to see negative. You know. You're this kid in care and you've got this label, and this is where you will end up...You can still hope.

Jessica's life story is clearly laced with moments in which her beliefs that there is 'hope' are emphasised, which allowed for some interesting sound bites like the one above. It was also interesting to hear narratives from someone who had experienced and witnessed many extremely negative aspects of family and the care system displaying a sense of resolve when helping her birth family in adulthood caused her even more heartache or for changing practice and being hopeful for

her future. Jessica is clearly motivated to have some input in how the care system is delivered within Victoria. It was great to hear this passion and articulated truisms about the care system as I perceived it and have critiqued it. But, as a researcher, it was hard work at times to resist pulling Jessica back into discussing her life story as representing her experiences and self, rather than many episodes of narrating through the lens of a professional within the area or sudden diatribes on the care system that derailed the telling of her story. Though, Jessica's life story was full with rich material and oft heart rendering and 'human' quotes, you still can't help being a little despondent about hearing the 'professional care leaver' voice – a care leaver with experience of talking about themselves and their view of care, as opposed to a young person who requires some support in making more sense of their experiences and who you hope the research aims will have some eventual beneficence.

As Jessica is undertaking a part-time Social Work university course, she not only had some conception of the process of project work, but also she appeared more assured than some of the other participants before meeting. This meant Jessica spoke to me like a peer, rather than a researcher who is somehow related to social work or the organisations in which recruitment took place. The benefits of Jessica's academic placing were her ability to articulate and be quite reflexive at times about her transitions, albeit in a measured way that could revert to professional type. Moreover, Jessica was able to offer a lot about the organisational culture of Agency 2 and its place in supporting young people in care, even if this appeared to be through 'rose-tinted' lenses leading to hints of bias at times, although this was understandable due to positive experiences being attached to her affiliation with Agency 2 during childhood. Moreover, she had a lot to say about the socio-cultural and political context as she had some conception about broader contexts. However passionate Jessica was, I have to accept and acknowledge a certain degree of 'researcher effect' in that she understandably perceived me to be a peer, as became clear when we had various 'Q&A' sessions about my PhD, university life, literature in the field and understandings of concepts such as resilience, which she endorsed as a viable framework for helping young people in care:

> *Teaching resilience is free, you do it yourself. You can teach somebody to be resilient and always bound back. It's free. They're going to have to bounce back. They are going to go through lots of issues and experience in life having to bounce back. You can assist somebody to be resilient…*

These discussions, however, also initially surfaced or were enhanced through the sensory information Jessica alluded to, this included reference to a care leaver who had written within an academic journal alongside other authors. Jessica remembered this article within a conversation about a resilience conference where she first discovered the quote within an article that inspired her. She later gave me a copy of this as I hadn't read it and so that I could read the quote in full. She used here memory of the quote as a metaphor for understanding how practice should be amended:

It says something like, when you enter the care sector if you're not given any tools to be able to create your own life – it's something about wanting to commit suicide or something – then all you have is your own blood to be able to draw on what you want to make your own life story. However, if you're given colours, crayons and the arts…and other things in life, you'll have a much better opportunity. When I read it I was just so inspired.

What struck me about this narrative episode was Jessica's need to place herself in academic and professional roles and discuss her life story assuming this voice. This may have transpired from a possible need to be able to convey her experiences comfortably or this has become her way over time in order to make sense of the negative experiences, which is her prerogative. On reflection, as Jessica presented herself as a peer who could inform me and help me understand the dilemmas faced by children in care, these subsumed, in my mind, the narratives that tapped into her vulnerabilities as a child and those that she still carries as a result. This is where the second reading will become useful in understanding Jessica's sense of self. Jessica's vulnerability and terrible life events did not form the main plot of her story, or become her then (or seemingly her day-to-day) life script, her persona as a resilient young woman and advocate did. This, I felt, was epitomised through her sign-off when we joked about there being 2 minutes before we had to get our trains and was there a final message after an already full life story interview and deliberations about the care system:

Jessica: Live and let live. Never give up. Quitting's not an option. To DHS – I will join you eventually….I want to be a child protection worker. I will eventually give that a go.

CC: So you want to be 'frontline'?

Jessica: Hell, yes!

<u>Second reading – the voice of the 'I'</u>

The features of the main plot of Jessica's life story, and attempts at tracing her past, present and future life upon the first reading, meant her sense of self within the voice of the 'I' from the second reading was not always evident. Following her overview of her key home and care transitions, Jessica explored her feelings with regards to residential care. Here she slipped into the use of 'you' from 'I' in her descriptions, turning her lived experience into a more generalised statement about residential

care and the children who are placed there. Also, however, she uses the voice of the 'I' as it appears to distinguish her amongst children that were placed alongside her:

> *…living in that environment was really quite tricky and you found that you picked up a lot of bad behaviours, or you went to do a lot of things that you never knew you could do. Or, you know, bend the rules and those types of things. But, I was sort of quick to smarten up my act and outline that I wasn't interested in that, and was like lucky enough to come across a lead tenant placement…a positive one [placement] because I got rid of crazy, psycho children, to having my own sort of independence and my own sort of environment to do as I would.*

Here, Jessica has distanced herself from other children within residential care through her deviation from the 'you' to her statement that she knew better than to be involved in bad behaviour. She appears indirectly to reason that she may have become embroiled into misbehaving and displaying negative character traits if she had not moved to a placement that provided the structure to follow her own way. This narrative episode, with its use of the 'I' and diversion from and to the incorporation of 'you', subtly hints at a muddled presentation of self. The following narrative episode also highlights this less discretely; in discussing attendance and discussions at conferences as a young person in care she describes:

> *Mainly what we talked about was the care sector at that time….them [delegates] writing down something we'd like to see changed in the care sector, and it was about following it up. So, I actually went to those managers conferences a couple of times to see where that was at…So, more or less we talked about relevant topics that were relevant to what was happening in the care sector. So you actually have a good idea, your finger on the pulse of where things are moving, and managers go from there.*

The use of the 'I' and 'you' within this narrative raises questions about Jessica's sense of past self and also her present portrayal of self. As such, the presentation of the teenage self, who had just entered care and could have such an impact on practice, seems misplaced. Unless, she really believed she was positioned to have managerial-level influence, possibly because of an affiliation with Agency 2 whom she holds with great esteem for their advocacy drives and potential. However, what seems striking here is again the muddled portrayal of self (in the context of a life story, at least). Jessica appears to assume her current perception as a professional role or student of social work into this dialogue in saying '…you have a good idea, your fingers on the pulse of where things are moving…' This is a strange representation of a past lived experience as it stands, one would expect some reference to leaving family or the family home. Thus, Jessica's choice of past sensory material closely reflected her projection of the past in terms of her present roles, and also highlighted a perceived destiny to advocate for children in care and have a hand in systematic change. The material reflected

positive and 'cool' experiences, but in doing so she places herself as having an important role in the 'care sector'. These experiences as portrayed appear to be bounded, too, by the organisational ethos of Agency 2, which was interwoven with messages regarding her transitions, of where Jessica came from and to in her present and future self:

> *I've tried to hammer and advocate the best I can to create a better care sector. If that's something I can do in my life, I'll be happy. I think that's one of my biggest aims, my biggest passion and dream, and that's what I'll follow through.*

Another narrative that also, to a degree, depersonalised her past representations contained the statement 'I suppose that reflects the very starting point, for me anyway, of entering a bit of the care sector'. This appears to be a metaphor that underlines the place that Agency 2 had in her life or the esteem she has for the organisation. As this narrative derived from her past sensory material that predominately centered on photographs and other items from her time on children's camps or working as a young person advocate for Agency 2, this clearly could have framed this response. However, it remains telling that Jessica oft portrays her present identity quite staunchly in these terms. Jessica also reflected in response to photographs of other young people on camp that 'I always sort of carry that…reflect back on things and wonder where they are at or what's happening for them'. This reflects that her use of language casts her apart from other children in care, or care leavers, and is not an entirely true of how she feels as they have left an impression with her. It seems this can be described as a reflective of a tension between her past self and present professional and student role that exhibits a confused presentation of her identity. This observed tension is heightened by Jessica's flits from the personal use of the 'I', or when remembering children in care, to diatribes on the care system and fate of care leavers:

> *Sarah, I still know, she's got married, has settled down, and whatever else. And I don't keep in close contact, but I still try to keep in contact, cos normally the outcome of children and young people in care, as the statistics will show you, is quite negative.*

Within her past presentations of self, Jessica seemingly imposes her own experiences and outcomes of transitions, and present self, to those of other care leavers and demarcates what you can and cannot become if you are a care leaver:

> *I think it is what you make it. I could of made it crap. I have a young sister, that also went in care around the same time as me…and she's in jail…She uses heroin. It's completely destroyed her life. Like, they were her choices. So, I could have probably taken to different paths to get where I am now, or I could of easily gone the other way and not necessarily done what it is*

that I needed to. So, I think you are in control of your own destiny; you have just got to get up and get it done.

Here we get a sense that Jessica is transposing her present self onto her past in suggesting that the outcomes of her transitions post-care were pre-destined. The narrative episode above may also have resulted from a defense mechanism against becoming wedded to unpleasant memories of the past, or the desire to present herself as a future professional in this area and long-time advocate wanting to *right the wrongs* of her transient care placements. Following the narrative episode above, the voice of the 'I' is placed into the present when Jessica states that she has periods of time where she reflects on her past and that she wants to 'sit there and do nothing as well, you know, feel like poor me…'. What is interesting here is that this represents the first reflection of the past in terms of the emotional impact it has on her sense of self. However, this is clearly qualified with the statement suggesting she wants to 'do nothing as well', suggesting that if you do not 'control your own destiny' and 'get it done' that you are dwelling on your past and not improving your circumstances. This narrative episode that considers individual agency across the life course is not an isolated one. When an attempt was made to *tap into* the human side of Jessica's story by attributing a personality trait to her outlook, she responded emotively: '…sometimes, you know, I get anxious or depressed. Or why am I doing this? Or it isn't fair. Or overwhelmed. Or things get too much and you don't have anyone to question about it…'. She again qualifies this with narratives drawing on notions of agency and resilience in saying:

You just get on with it...[when you reach] my level of age you start knowing what is right and what is wrong, and how does it fit…I haven't always been totally strong of mind. But, I always try to find resilience to bounce back. Yeah.

When drawing more directly onto her recent past with reference to the present, Jessica's voice in the text again displays some tensions between the identity she has established for herself during the early-to-mid stages of the life story and also contradictions in her adoption of language with regards to professional and social work roles. This clash of expressed identities has salience within a narrative regarding her sister, who also spent time in the care system and has problems surrounding drug addiction. In considering this narrative episode regarding her sister, this clash is best brought into view as three different aspects that each reflects contradictions in identity. Aspect one deals with her role identity as a sister and Jessica's feelings about her addiction:

…she is volatile, and toxic. I've tried very hard with her…She's very different to me. I'm very different. I love her and I try to help her…I can understand it. But, at the same time, I wish she'd just make it a little better for herself.

Aspect two considers elements of agency and that her sister's decision making faculties are at odds with what Jessica would have expected (or are contestable due to them not being pathways that Jessica would not have chosen herself).

> *Sometimes it does get hard - but I know what's a better route? Honestly, I don't know…She's [her sister] just had lots and lots and lots of, I don't know, hiccups in life I think - If you can call them that! I don't know if she attracts it…trouble seems to follow. You know at some point you've got to take responsibility for that or draw a line in the sand with it be to able to get on with your own life.*

The extract seems to be an affront to her assumed professional and social work identity in that it does not consider addiction as an illness, or even the wider social influences at play. Instead, Jessica makes a broadsweep comment about choice in these circumstances that seem at odds with social work practice and the associated discourses you would expect. However, Jessica again changes track; aspect three considers external influences, but soon reverts to the professional advocate and social work student voice:

> *But I suppose for her, I don't know, she did have a few ups and downs and it wasn't necessarily the best foot up. If you are running the race you wouldn't want to start there. Do you know what I mean? She's got good reason for it and so she fits in with the majority. That's the outcome, isn't it? That's what they tell people. That's what you read. That's what you see. You know. A lot of statistics will tell you anyway. So, she fits.*

Interestingly, all these narrative sections, and the inherent contradictions, pretty much come under a few narratives within the middle of the life story. This could reflect the gradual construction and development of Jessica's narrated self and the gradual direct portrayal of her past experiences and sensemaking components about her life course. Tracing consistent features of the story and recurring metaphor was not so clear cut in this narrative due to the different voices. Jessica's life story was more of a developmental genesis in terms of the voice of the 'I' and tracing the sense of self that evolves from the past, present and future talk.

In further unpacking Jessica's narratives regarding elements of control over life course destiny in her subsequent narratives, she underlines that these traits that link to notions of resilience are necessary in order to equip children in care with the ability to handle their transitions. In many ways this was inherently a sad reflection on her past, implying a strong sense that her destiny is drawn out from a

lack of support and bad experiences during her post-care transitions and, as such, this is a position she has adopted. In relation to the transition from care Jessica recounts:

> *As sad as it sounds, it's better to be straight up than it is to paint a picture of happy lambs. It's not happy. Life is hard. It's not going to be a walk in the park. It's not a walk in the park for anyone…Some people have got it easier. You know, have got a lot of friends, are still at home and are 27. Mum and dad still cook for them, wash for them - and they are not moving out anytime soon! They are saving up all their money. They are comfortable. They are happy. They don't have a worry in the world. I look at them and I think 'good Lord'…lucky you.*

In another subsequent narrative episode that draws on Jessica's negotiations of transitions without support, she uses the voice of the 'I' to confirm how determined she was and how it was down to her endeavour. However, here we see direct recognition that there was a lack of prerequisite support to aid her transition from care, meaning her options were limited:

> *I'm definitely trying to create a life - if I can hang in there for myself - that's more positive…go down the track of the right way. I suppose I just made my own way, and off I went. It wasn't really something that was talked about, leaving care. People just did it and off they went from there.*

In following these narratives that reflect on a present self who negotiated transitions successfully, another inherent contradiction came into play when she then surmised that removal from her family home into care was her turning point in influencing her present self. This countered earlier presentations of a deleterious care system. This narrative could possibly follow a development of self throughout the life story in that her professional and academic role is want to critique the system, but her sense of self in the life story now developed into placing herself in her reflections on her past life more closely:

> *I think I'm lucky for being in the care system. At least I didn't have to stay home and f*****g be beaten or whatever…I've tried to do the right thing. But I suppose for me, the way that I saw it is quite different from the way other people saw it. That's probably the difference. A lot went into the care sector and I don't think [pause]. The ones that think 'f***, I'm lucky to be here' [are resilient]. Like I could be at home right now living very much below the poverty line, wondering whether I am going to eat or am I going to be beaten. There's like heaps of negative stories that I can think of that make me think f*** I'm lucky to be here. It could have been so much worse. Like, I could have been there until I was 18 and left a timid, lost young*

lady going out into the world believing that it's ok for men to abuse me. Or it's ok for me not to have a voice. Or it's ok just to accept things the way they are and not change them…

Gradually, a sense of Jessica's identity from the voice of the 'I' unfolds, rather than a narrated identity in her presentation of self. In another subsequent narrative Jessica diverts from narratives which impose agency onto young people into ones reflecting on her personality traits in response to her family background and care pathways that may have made the difference:

Maybe I've mapped it out for myself [when entering care] – do you want to go on this camp and be a kid for once, those types of things. I went in with that perspective. Whereas a lot of people go in angry, confused, lost, not sure why they have been taken away, you know, what's gone wrong for them and they are just mad. For them, it's more of an anger. Whether this has got to do with attachment, I don't know. Or maybe when I was little I thought a little more maturely because I had to act maturely and look after siblings…

Towards the close of the interview, the developing sense of self and voice of the 'I' led to a first person narrative regarding entering care. Here she draws on the disclosure of her step-father's abuse to a healthcare professional and later a friend who enquired about this visit. The catalyst for her entry into care came when her friend told her own parents who failed to believe her story and informed her family:

She went home and told her mum that I'd told her this – her mum didn't believe it cos we lived in the country and what goes on behind closed doors, stays behind closed doors…[she] believed I was a liar….she told my parents…the next thing I know my step-father flew out of his chair…and kicked the shit out of me…She [the school nurse] took me into the hospital and they took lots of photos and like I looked like one of those criminals like…So, yeah, and they took lots of photos and kept them as a record.

Following this narrative she alludes to a sense of vindication felt that she has moved forward after the truth came out. When a subsequent discussion arose regarding whether looking at her care record is a solution to addressing some of the questions she mentioned within her life story, and also whether she could access more detail about these events, she stated:

I don't know. Probably not. But, I don't know…Like I've advocated for kids to be able to, if they want that information, to be able to get it. I've got my dream. I've got what I want of memories.

This somewhat epitomises the journey of the use of the voice of the 'I' within Jessica's life story; explorations of the self in relation to Jessica as advocate, Jessica as former care child, and Jessica as a young woman who has mapped out a positive future for herself, meeting towards the close of her life story.

Third reading – reading for relationships

In this reading for relations, Jessica's ideas around notions of healthy and adequate support when 'family withdraws' came to the fore in her narratives. Additionally, as Jessica draws on social relations more deeply than she for the most part of her life story, the influence of relationships on Jessica's sense of self and her identity as a care leaver is quite vividly portrayed. In drawing on her relations with significant others, Jessica's relationships can be understood in terms of a relational dualism between receiving support from the organisation Agency 2 and herself acting as a channel of support for her birth family. Her telling of her past, present and future lives are intertwined with talk of significant relations. In two separate narratives relating more directly to the past, she drew on a void left, and the place of external support here, when family structures are not so strong:

You get a little lost cos you've never had any, I guess, role models in life to show you that this is what life's about…You see lots of events around abuse, people not working, you know generational stuff…you don't see that functioning normal sort of a lifestyle around you all the time.

In this second quote, Jessica discusses external support and its impact on her sense of self in a narrative that delved into a sense of family support derived from involvement with Agency 2 as a teenager in care:

It's like somebody is proud…that [involvement with Agency 2] was probably what I needed – direction, and empowerment, and support, and guidance. You know, somebody to believe in me – and that's what [Agency 2] means to me. Like, it will always be there…just [there will be] different people, I suppose, that will take over at different times and you may get a little lost in it. But, I reckon I can still walk in there and feel that sense of security or warmth.

Jessica narrates that Agency 2 certainly presented an emotionally supportive framework for her in her teen years, one that she has carried through and has helped shape her identity as an advocate. Her narratives relating to her family reflect a supportive role towards her birth mother and young siblings she herself was compelled to assume from childhood and into adulthood. In narratives that present her past, Jessica often talked about lived experiences relating to her siblings, and the motherly role she had to adopt due to the many problems her mother was coping with. Jessica's relations with her young sister became further embedded in terms of a matriarchal role that her sister's drug abuse history led to her to take. Jessica mentioned that for a short period of time her sister lived with her in her independent accommodation, this led to friction due to her sister's drug use and violent outbursts. These harmful events that Jessica discussed also acted as a catalyst to her realising that the role that was attributed to her would not change: '…at the moment I'm sort of giving her a wide berth because it starts to become a massive responsibility of constant drama, drama, drama'.

Jessica narrations touch on the emotional impact on her gradual decision to separate herself from her birth family as a way of protecting herself from future turmoil:

> *As hard as it is, this year has been the first year that I've gone I've got to cut some of those ties. It's made me anxious. It's made me depressed. It's made me nervous. It's made me terrified. I've been lost. I've been left. I've been alright…I've always missed them, and I've always wanted them around…And it's even worse when you've got to let it go…*

Jessica's acceptance that her birth family is negatively impinging on her life also expressed inadvertently her vulnerability resulting from her detached and difficult relationship with her birth mother. In a poignant narrative, Jessica explains how chasing her mother's emotional support has oft left her confused and hurt: '…it's the hardest thing to admit that you never will [have a bond with your mother]. It kills ya. And it's even worse when you have to let it go'. In a related narrative episode Jessica explores her current relations with her mother in which she explains that 'every now and then I'll get this little bit of care from my mother…and it's like oh, she understands!'. Jessica moves on to state that this is short-lived, and she is often thrown back into her carer role towards her mother and siblings through her mother's lack of intuition and emotional capability to parent:

> *I'm like, it's sort of not my role and I don't get why you [her mother] are putting me in that position…Every now and then you might get that glimmer of it, but it doesn't last very long.*

Here Jessica's maturity to realise what is healthy support in terms of her social relations reflects her growing sense of independence, however difficult it is to remove herself from these situations. Jessica holds the perspective that she needs to distance herself from difficult family relations quite firmly; another narrative episode sheds some light on why:

> *You can always want for something in your life that you will just never get…And, if you don't accept it you will never be at peace with it. It can consume you. It can make you angry. You know, forever wanting. All my sister will ever say is 'I want my mother…I expect her to be a mum'. It makes her angry...*

This shift in the dynamics of her relationships over time, however, seems to reflect strongly on her present relationship with her partner and her stable future life, but also her growing confidence in family situations from being involved with her partner's family. Jessica narrates the toll the building of this alternate family network had initially; this also reflects the impact of her birth family relations on her notions of family life:

> *His [her fiancé's] family are amazing. Like, I can never get that connectedness. When we first met he always wanted to question why I didn't want to get close to his family. It was because they freaked me out! I didn't know this sort of in your pocket, talk about everything type relationships…His family are pretty cool and I see a whole new working world of family life, and just try not to reflect too much on mine being shit or whatever.*

Forth reading – considerations of the life story within the broader cultural and socio-political contexts

In reading for how Jessica may place herself in the broader cultural, social and political contexts, again her reflections on her social relations and involvement in organisations relating to the care system derives clear narratives. For example, in adopting the practitioner and advocate voice she draws on notions of childhood risk and how there is a societal and political duty to protect traditional ideals relating to childhood. In a narrative that semi-seriously argued that neglectful parents should be put into a form of care, she explores how childhoods should be protected:

> *Have you seen that movie A Beautiful Mind - where that child thinks it's all a game – let them be two or three where they don't know that that's not mum or whatever. They might have a bit of an attachment disorder when they are older but they don't have to have, in some ways,*

a complete disability because of the mistreated ways of their parents who have wrecked their lives or their childhood, in a system that is not necessarily structured.

Jessica here taps into ideals of childhood innocence but she is seemingly bringing her own experiences of family and care into view. The narratives of this kind within Jessica's life story explore some interesting, and current, perspectives relating to childhood harm and neglect. In particular, she draws on permeating cultural issues over time in relation to her childhood and that of her birth mother in reflecting on the parallels between their experiences of family as a child. She gives a narrative account of the key events in her mother's childhood, relating to separation through death and abuse, and reflects:

She [her birth mother] stayed in an abusive relationship for 10 years and she didn't have any family support. A lot of her family pulled our, so she was lonely and scared…No support of a mother or anything like that; done the best she could in that situation. The life cycle's chosen. I ended up being a parent of the child, mum ends up suffering depression, meets a domestic violent partner that doesn't treat her right, didn't have a father when she was young. So, there it is, you see it.

As this narrative flows further Jessica adds that '…you can continue that pattern or you can break it'; she also places her own experiences of this 'life cycle' in the broader cultural and social contexts here, but also within other narrative episodes in arguing that generally speaking issues pertaining to abuse and neglect are discussed more openly, increasing opportunity for individual voice. However, importantly, in thinking more broadly about her social position it is clear that her advocacy roles and current relationship security have also been a significant in allowing Jessica to find her voice and shape an identity away from the 'timid, lost young lady going out into the world believing that it's ok for men to abuse me' that she stated she may of adopted.

In terms of notions of support relating to transitional trajectories, Jessica had clear conceptions of the wider cultural and social context in which youth transitions play out. However, she almost argues with herself within contradictory narratives that claim, on one hand, that support should be channeled to young people whilst in care to build the resilience needed in order to transition successfully post-care; but on a the other hand, she suggests in her narratives that a lack of policy into practice post-care casts a shadow over her transitions to independence and that she had to have the resolve to make the most of it and follow an ideal path. She concludes, in a statement relevant to policy into practice, that there is a tension between 'whether or not it's going back to the root of the problem, or whether or not it's dealing with the current situation'.

To Jessica, the care system representing a double-edged sword in which she felt 'lucky' to be removed from her family home, but also experienced negative and unstable care placements. Whilst within the system, she was clearly influenced by the programmes that the Non-governmental organisation, Agency 2, ran for children in care. Jessica also recognised that when the dynamics between the young people within her lead tenant placement were sound, the programme was valuable in guiding her towards independent living in terms of providing a more settled platform from which to find her own independent accommodation.

Jessica's ideas regarding notions of independence and support 'when family withdraws' were evident; her ability to situate herself as someone who is independent from a collective care leaver identity or recipient of direct welfare services from particular services seems, from her narratives, to be testament to her own drives and ambitions. However, perhaps paradoxically, the policy into practice gaps that was in evidence when she left care at 17 may have provided further impetus for her to advocate and follow a career pathway, instead of the more undesirable pathways attributed towards other care leavers as described within her life story.